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# Non-traditional Social Work Students: Motivations, Challenges and Keys to Success

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Non-traditional Social Work Students:  
Motivations, Challenges and Keys to Success

Anne Adcock

St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas

## Abstract

The field of social work routinely attracts the non-traditional student. For the purposes of this dissertation, non-traditional students were identified as meeting two or more of the criteria established by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): “being independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependents, being a single caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, delaying postsecondary enrollment, attending school part time, and being employed full time” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 1). Difficult life experiences including past trauma, addiction, abuse, and contact with the social service system lead non-traditional students to want to help those with like experiences through the profession, motivating their pursuit of higher education. Due to pursuing college later in life, non-traditional students face challenges that differ from their traditional counterparts such as household and financial responsibilities, caregiving roles and full time employment. These students must utilize various supports to meet those challenges. This dissertation explores the phenomenon of the non-traditional social work student and its impact on higher education.

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## **Introduction**

Social work education often attracts non-traditional students - many of them have overcome various life circumstances and want to use their experiences to help others. These students face unique challenges to successfully completing an undergraduate or graduate degree. Work, family and other responsibilities often present obstacles as they work to complete a higher education program. In addition, some of these non-traditional students also are first-generation college students. This brings its own set of challenges to the college experience. As social work educators, we teach students to empower their clients. How do we empower students that want to complete their degree yet face challenges that are different from the traditional 20 year old college student?

The author of this dissertation pursued social work as a non-traditional student with specific life experiences that drew her to the profession. After several years in practice, she entered higher education as an instructor in a social work program at a small, private, faith-based institution. As an instructor at a satellite campus, most of her students met the non-traditional criteria. The topic of this dissertation was chosen based on the author's own experience as a non-traditional student of social work and her observations of the experiences of students in her classroom. The topic of non-traditional students in social work education is explored through three distinct, yet related, scholarship products.

The first product is a conceptual paper focused on the life experience of non-traditional social work students. Life experience of the non-traditional student is presented as an advantage in preparation for work in the field. Using Adult Learning Theory and Transformative Learning Theory as a foundation, the impact of life experiences on the educational pursuits of the non-traditional social work student is explored. A review of the literature on the subject is presented.

Case examples based on the author's life and observation of students in the classroom illustrate the influence of life experience on the non-traditional social work student.

The second product of the dissertation details a qualitative research study completed by the author. A phenomenological study of successful social work graduates meeting the pre-determined criteria for non-traditional students was completed. The impact of life experience on career choice was explored. In addition, the impact of life experience and status as a non-traditional student was considered when discussing the social work education process. The following questions and more were addressed: How do significant life experiences motivate students to pursue social work? How do those experiences help or hinder the educational process? What specific challenges do non-traditional students face? How do they overcome those challenges and succeed in their educational pursuits?

The final product is an overview of the author's presentations of her qualitative research findings at the national Bachelor Program Director's conference for educators in social work higher education. Study results were presented regarding the phenomenon of non-traditional social work students, their life experiences that motivated them to pursue the profession, and their challenges to degree completion. Also discussed were steps social work faculty can take to help foster success among this aspect of the student population. Opportunity for discussion among attendees was provided. Evaluation by session attendees is included.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Adult Learning Theory, Transformative Learning Theory and Social Capital Theory form the basis for the focus of this dissertation: the motivations, challenges and keys to success of non-traditional students of social work. Adult Learning Theory speaks to the motivation of non-traditional students and how their life experiences can be used to enrich the learning process. Non-traditional students are typically more driven than their traditional counterparts and have a more focused plan of their intentions beyond the university setting. The challenges of the learning process are addressed by Transformative Learning theory. This concept helps the author to address the ways in which life experience serves as a learning tool for the non-traditional student, allowing them to grasp the information and process it in ways not available to the traditional student. Finally, Social Capital theory aids in the explanation of the non-traditional student's ability to overcome challenges and be successful in their educational pursuits. Through support of a social network that typically includes family, friends, classmates and the academic community, non-traditional students are able to meet the challenges of higher education and complete their degree.

Malcolm Knowles, the exemplar theorist of Adult Learning Theory, began his work in the early 1970s and continued to contribute to the subject until the early 1990s. He contended that adult students are motivated, goal driven and work well both independently and within a group (Knowles, 1974). Adult learners, according to Knowles (1974) should be encouraged by educators to draw from their life experience to enhance their learning. When this occurs, according to Mezirow (1997), the learning becomes more transformative in nature. This transformation allows for greater self-awareness, high levels of critical thinking and the assessment of information in a way that transforms the learner's judgement and problem solving



ability (Mezirow, 1997). Mezirow (1997) contends that this transformation is “the essence of adult education” (p. 11).

The benefits of life experience to the non-traditional social work student can also be realized through the lens of transformative learning theory. The exemplar theorist, Jack Mezirow (1997), describes transformative learning as using a frame of reference in which education is used as a tool of change. In the non-traditional adult learner, the frame of reference is shaped by life experiences and the resulting values, opinions and feelings. In turn, those impact the learning experience. According to Mezirow (1997), this allows for critical reflection of concepts and information being delivered as well as self-reflection by the learner regarding how they interpret information based on life experiences and the resulting frame of reference.

Transformative learners approach learning using four distinct, complimentary processes (Mezirow, 1997). First, learners expand on current perspectives and viewpoints. (Mezirow, 1997). Through the learning process, viewpoints already recognized are expanded and supported through the educational process. Second, the learner can establish new points of view (Mezirow, 1997). Exposure to new ideas and perspectives in the learning environment contributes to this process – adult learners must be open to viewpoints different than their own. Third, viewpoints can be transformed through learning (Mezirow, 1997). Greater self-awareness and a broadening worldview that is often achieved through higher education can allow the adult learner to see new possibilities in a given situation that were not previously evident. Fourth, transformative learners become aware of their own bias in the learning process (Mezirow, 1997). This awareness is essential to the transformative learning process. The non-traditional social work student, based on their life experiences and ability to apply them throughout the learning process, is uniquely prepared for experiencing learning in a transformative manner.

Social capital theory is routinely used in academia to explain student success or the lack thereof. A broad definition describes it as social relationships that exist within a given community and the reciprocal relationships that occur and contribute to goal attainment by group members (Vorhaus, 2014b). Other definitions describe it as containing social assets and resources that aid in goal attainment (Vorhaus, 2014b). Explicitly, social capital theory projects that there are “social networks that can be activated” (Wall, et. al, 1998). The idea of social capital is used implicitly in the fields of sociology and anthropology as a means of understanding social cohesion, integration and hierarchy (Wall, et. al, 1998). While the fields using this theory have disagreed on some components, it is widely accepted that “there is the implicit understanding that social capital will be useful for enhancing some other feature such as learning, social mobility, economic growth, political prominence or community vitality” (Wall, et. al, 1998).

## **Summary of Scholarship Products**

### **Product One: Life Experience as Preparation for Practice: Do Non-Traditional Social Work Students Have an Advantage?**

In this conceptual piece, life experience and its implication on the higher education experience of social work students is explored. The author contends that the experiences prior to entering college change the worldview of the non-traditional student and impact their college experience, particularly in the field of social work. Through her own experience and through observation of her students the author has found the life experience can be crucial in understanding the concepts and skills necessary for practicing social work. Through the application of Adult Learning Theory and Transformative Learning theory, Product One seeks to answer this question: Are non-traditional college students better prepared than traditional students for the social work profession based on their life experiences?

### **Product Two: Non-Traditional Social Work Students: Motivations, Challenges and Keys to Success**

Product Two details the results of a phenomenological qualitative study of successful social work graduates meeting the pre-determined criteria for non-traditional students. The impact of life experience on career choice was explored. The impact of life experience and status as a non-traditional student was considered when discussing the social work education process. Support systems utilized by these successful students were discussed. Participants were asked to reflect on their choice of social work and their experience as a social work and critique the experience. The following questions and more were addressed: How do significant life experiences motivate students to pursue social work? How do those experiences help or hinder

the educational process? What specific challenges do non-traditional students face? How do they overcome those challenges and succeed in their educational pursuits?

**Product Three: “I’ve Been There”: Non-traditional Social Work Student**

The results of Product Two were presented at an annual conference of social work educators. Product Three is an overview of that peer-reviewed presentation. Verification of the presentation is outlined materials used are made available. Results of an evaluation of the presentation are summarized and the author’s learning based on the experience is described.

## **Discussion**

### **Implications for Social Work Education**

Social work education programs tend to enroll a high number of non-traditional students, when compared to many other disciplines. The nature of the work is attractive to the non-traditional student, who, due to life experiences, wishes to be of services to others. The past life experience of the non-traditional student can be used in a positive manner throughout the learning process.

Faculty in social work programs tend to view their teaching and interactions with students as a form of practice. This is true for the researcher in this study and the reason for the focus of this project. Non-traditional students are routinely drawn to the field of social work and can make excellent practitioners upon completion of their degrees.

Faculty in all disciplines should be aware of the motivations that bring a non-traditional student to academia in order to better understand their perspectives and worldviews. Social work faculty, in particular, should make efforts to learn about the life experiences of non-traditional students that motivate them to enter the field. By doing so, faculty can take measures to encourage self-reflection and self-awareness among these students in order to prevent bias and enmeshment in the practice setting. Students should be encouraged to become aware of their ability to practice with certain populations without allowing past life experiences, particularly negative ones, to impair their ability to practice in a competent manner.

Faculty and university administration can potentially improve their services by being aware of the challenges faced by non-traditional students. Faculty can serve in a mentoring capacity by meeting one on one with students who are struggling and helping them navigate the degree process while dealing with other life responsibilities. A willingness to listen with

understanding and empathy is often very helpful to the non-traditional student that is going through a difficult time.

At the institutional level, focused efforts tailored to non-traditional students can be utilized to encourage student success. Tutoring, library, financial aid and other traditional university services can develop offerings to specifically address the needs of the non-traditional student. The first step is the realization of what those challenges are and how the services that are offered to traditional students may not meet the needs of the non-traditional student population.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Future studies would include a larger and more diverse demographic base of non-traditional student, as the participant group in the study portion of this dissertation was limited. It would be beneficial to include students from other universities and other areas of the country to expand the work of this project.

When focusing on social work students in particular, future studies could look more deeply into the life experiences of the non-traditional student. How do students with traumatizing life experiences approach their studies and their work following completion of their degree? What specific challenges do these past events have on social work practice? How do these practitioners learn to set aside any biases, if at all? What are the ramifications for clients?

The risks of re-traumatization would be an interesting subject for future research. Many non-traditional students express a desire to work with clients with similar experiences to their own. Researching the impact of this on the practitioner would show the dangers, if any of this trend. In addition, suggestions for steps that could be taken in the educational setting to prepare future practitioners for the possible risks of serving clients with similar backgrounds could be developed.

University services tailored specifically to non-traditional students would be another useful area of research. The author found that this is an area in which universities have a “one size fits all” approach. Non-traditional students have needs that differ from the traditional university student. With the growth of this segment of the student population, it is imperative that universities provide services to meet those needs as a means to recruit and retain non-traditional students.

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Life Experience as Preparation for Practice:  
Do Non-Traditional Social Work Students Have an Advantage?

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### Abstract

The field of social work is often the career choice of non-traditional students – those over age 25 with life responsibilities not typical of the traditional 18-22 year old college student. Non-traditional students routinely verbalize an attraction to the profession based on their own life experiences. Do these students have an advantage over the traditional college student? Are they more prepared for the profession? Using Adult Learning Theory and Transformative Learning Theory as a foundation, the impact of life experiences on the educational pursuits of the non-traditional social work student will be explored. A review of the literature on the subject will be presented. Case examples based on the author's life and observation of students in the classroom will illustrate the influence of life experience on the non-traditional social work student.

*Keywords:* Non-traditional, life experience, adult learning theory, transformative learning theory

## Life Experience as Preparation for Practice:

### Do Non-Traditional Social Work Students Have an Advantage?

Non-traditional students have long been a part of university life. Students that do not transition directly from high school to higher education do so for a variety of reasons – family responsibilities, financial concerns, family history of not attending college, deciding to pursue employment that does not require a college degree, or simply not wanting to attend college. At some point, non-traditional students decide to pursue higher education. Change in life circumstances, job loss, greater financial stability and desire for career change are among the reasons students begin college at later than the traditional age and with different life circumstances than the traditional student. The life experiences of non-traditional students in the time period between high school and college entry change their worldview and impact their college experience, particularly in the field of social work. The purpose of this paper is to explore this concept: Are non-traditional college students better prepared than traditional students for the social work profession based on their life experiences? As this concept is explored, a non-traditional student will be identified as meeting two or more of the criteria established by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): “being independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependents, being a single caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, delaying postsecondary enrollment, attending school part time, and being employed full time” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 1).

Along with the demographic differences from the traditional student, non-traditional students have different motivations for college attendance. While the traditional student may attend due to parent and society expectations, they typically do not have other strong motivations. The motivations of non-traditional students have been found to be wide ranging:

“they see learning as a way to acquire new knowledge, help them with their professional advancement, contribute to their community and satisfy at the same time some external expectations” (Francois, 2014). Non-traditional students enter the college experience with a sense of direction, determination and motivation often not found in the traditional student.

Non-traditional students of social work have been observed by the author, a social work educator, to have an added dimension of motivation for attending pursuit of a social work degree. Life experiences such as histories of abuse, past addiction, foster care placement, juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy and caring for ailing relatives are just some of the examples of students in the author’s classroom. These experiences have been observed to serve as motivations for students to improve their lives and the lives of others through the social work profession. In addition, non-traditional students have been observed by the author to routinely perform well in both the classroom and the field, often as a direct result of their past life experiences.

The author, as an instructor at an extended campus in a rural setting, teaches and advises primarily non-traditional students. Often intimidated by the college experience, non-traditional students rely on the author as a mentor, allowing the author to learn about their lives beyond the classroom. From the time students enter the program, the author encourages them to “find their people” – to think about and focus on a particular population of potential client that interests them.

“Lucy”, a former student of the author, was an example of a non-traditional student motivated by life experience. A 39 year old mother of three and grandmother of one, she had history as a victim of domestic violence in her previous marriage. The father of her children was incarcerated as the result of drug trafficking charges, leaving her to raise and provide for her

children alone. Having completed two years at the local community college, Lucy entered the social work program at the author's university. As she progressed through the program, she faced various obstacles that challenged her and caused her to question her ability to achieve her degree. Lucy was motivated by her past experiences and through the educational experience, was empowered to move past those in order to form a better life for herself and her children. She found support for her efforts from the many support systems in her life – her mother, children, instructors, classmates and friends. Through these connections and the support provided by them, Lucy achieved her Bachelor's degree in Social Work and is now employed by an agency providing drug treatment and prevention services to adolescents in her community.

Despite the challenges, the author will argue that the life experience, resiliency and sources of support possessed by the non-traditional student leads them to be successful in their educational endeavors. In addition, these students are often found to be at an advantage in the job market due to their combination of education and life experience.

Studies pertaining to non-traditional students in higher education tend to focus on the challenges and difficulties these students experience in pursuit of a degree. Roksa and Velez (2012) suggest that students that delay entry into higher education are at greater risk of not completing a degree than those that continue directly from high school. One of the contributing factors that supports this stance is the family responsibilities that non-traditional students tend to have that can interfere with higher educational pursuits, particularly the time required to insure a successful outcome (Roksa & Velez, 2012). Other concerns related to non-traditional students include: unfamiliarity with technology utilized in higher education, insufficient library and research skills, poor writing ability and increased class absences due to family and employment commitments. Views such as these portray the non-traditional student and their higher education



experience in a negative way; however, there are positive aspects to college attendance by the non-traditional student, particularly in the field of social work. When studying aspects of the life cycle and life transitions, for example, students can draw from their experiences and enrich the learning experience. Lister (2003) found that students made valuable contributions to the classroom experience by sharing their life experiences in discussion settings. Lafrance, Gray and Herbert (2004) contend that social work students with unresolved traumatic life experiences could face difficulties adapting to the profession; however they acknowledge that those that had achieved healthy resolution and a sense of self-awareness could certainly become “capable practitioners”. The author, based on personal experience and observations maintains that social work educators should embrace non-traditional students motivated by life experiences, guide them through the self-awareness process and empower them to become productive practitioners and contribute in a positive way to the profession.

### **Transformative Learning by Adult Learners: A Theoretical Foundation**

The non-traditional university student typically enters the classroom with little to no experience in higher learning in the traditional sense; however, they have wisdom and knowledge gained from experiences prior to entering college. Malcolm Knowles, the exemplar theorist of Adult Learning Theory, began his work in the early 1970s and continued to contribute to the subject until the early 1990s. He contended that adult students are motivated, goal driven and work well both independently and within a group (Knowles, 1974). Adult learners, according to Knowles (1974) should be encouraged by educators to draw from their life experience to enhance their learning. When this occurs, according to Mezirow (1997), the learning becomes more transformative in nature. This transformation allows for greater self-awareness, high levels of critical thinking and the assessment of information in a way that

transforms the learner's judgement and problem solving ability (Mezirow, 1997). Mazirow (1997) contends that this transformation is "the essence of adult education" (p. 11).

The author has observed non-traditional students choose to pursue social work based on life experience that is often filled with struggles and disappointment. Through the empowerment provided by education, the author has witnessed many of these students move on to become successful practitioners in the profession. Life experiences complement and enhance the educational experience, as noted in the poem by Robert Browning Hamilton:

"I walked a mile with Pleasure;  
She chatted all the way;  
But left me none the wiser  
For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with Sorrow;  
And ne'er a word said she;  
But, oh! The things I learned from her,  
When Sorrow walked with me."

— [Robert Browning Hamilton](#)

When asking college students why they are pursuing social work, answers normally include, "I want to help people" or "I want to work with children". Non-traditional students tend to expand on these desires by reflecting on life experiences in their answer: "I experienced domestic violence in my 20s and want to help other victims" or "I want to work with people

experiencing substance abuse because I can relate to them”. This more complex perspective directly impacts the learning experience and serves as motivation for the non-traditional student.

Adult learning theory seeks to identify the adult learner, their unique qualities and strategies educators should use in order to meet their needs. Merriam (2008) suggests that the 21<sup>st</sup> century adult learner requires a more holistic approach rather than approaching learning as exclusively a cognitive process. Merriam (2008) refers to a greater emphasis on the mind-body connection in the learning process and how the “affective dimension of learning” enhances the experience.

Non-traditional social work students have been observed by the author to have an affective reaction to much of the content presented in the social work curriculum. This is normally directly related to the life experiences of the student. Non-traditional students that are parents, for example, participate well in and contribute greatly to class discussions on parenting, discipline and child abuse due to their personal attachment to these issues. The traditional student typically cannot have the same level of affective involvement with the learning of these types of issues due to their lack of life experience.

In addition to the holistic approach to learning that impacts the non-traditional student, Merriam (2008) also emphasizes the adult learning theory concept of narrative learning as an important strategy for linking life experience to the learning process. In this approach, students make meaning of their life experiences through application of them in the learning environment (Merriam, 2008). Students reach a higher level of learning through the use of their life experiences as a tool to give meaning to the process of knowledge building. Traditional students might experience learning in this way as well; however, in the social work setting, the non-traditional student would likely have an advantage.

### **Adults as Transformative Learners**

The benefits of life experience to the non-traditional social work student can also be realized through the lens of transformative learning theory. The exemplar theorist, Jack Mezirow (1997), describes transformative learning as using a frame of reference in which to use education as a tool of change. In the non-traditional adult learner, the frame of reference is shaped by life experiences and the resulting values, opinions and feelings. In turn, those impact the learning experience. According to Mezirow (1997), this allows for critical reflection of concepts and information being delivered as well as self-reflection by the learner regarding how they interpret information based on life experiences and the resulting frame of reference.

Transformative learners approach learning using four distinct, complimentary processes (Mezirow, 1997). First, learners expand on current perspectives and viewpoints. (Mezirow, 1997). Through the learning process, viewpoints already recognized are expanded and supported through the educational process. Second, the learner can establish new points of view (Mezirow, 1997). Exposure to new ideas and perspectives in the learning environment contributes to this process – adult learners must be open to viewpoints different than their own. Third, viewpoints can be transformed through learning (Mezirow, 1997). Greater self-awareness and a broadening worldview that is often achieved through higher education can allow the adult learner to see new possibilities in a given situation that were not previously evident. Fourth, transformative learners become aware of their own bias in the learning process (Mezirow, 1997). This awareness is essential to the transformative learning process. The non-traditional social work student, based on their life experiences and ability to apply them throughout the learning process, is uniquely prepared for experiencing learning in a transformative manner. Social work educators can utilize the life experiences of non-traditional students to encourage this process.

The author teaches in a social work program in a rural area in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. The non-traditional students in the author's classroom are often first generation college students that have a narrow worldview due to their geographic and cultural environment. As areas such as diversity, policy and global issues are explored in the social work curriculum, these students are observed to experience learning in a transformational manner. Their perspectives of the world and the diversity within it are broadened and they critically examine their own biases and how those biases can impact practice in the social work profession. Non-traditional students become open to differing viewpoints and are able to approach issues from different perspectives as they move through the program toward graduation.

Adult Learning Theory and Transformative Learning Theory can both be applied to the non-traditional social work student. The adult learner brings with them life experiences that enhance the learning process and provide motivation to pursue the profession. As a result of that life experience, the non-traditional social work student is appropriately equipped for a learning experience that is transformational in nature. These attributes support the argument that non-traditional students are highly capable participants in both social work education and the profession upon graduation.

### **Traits of the Non-traditional Student – A Review of the Literature**

What are some of the specific traits that non-traditional students bring to the college experience that set them apart from the traditional college student? A review of the literature reveals motivation, life experience and spiritual influences as unique to the non-traditional student. Through the use of these characteristics and the support of faculty and university resources, the non-traditional social work student can have a fulfilling higher education experience and can contribute positively to the profession. In addition, the non-traditional student

can enhance the learning experience for their fellow students through the application of their life experiences into class discussion and assignments. This supports the author's stance that the non-traditional student is well-equipped for social work higher education based on life experience. In addition, the life experiences of the non-traditional student can also be utilized to benefit the educational experience of their classmates.

### **Motivation of the Non-traditional Student**

A student must have some form of motivation to pursue a college education. While some motivations are universal – desire to have a good career, need for a stable income, family expectation to attend college – others are unique to the individual. As a group, non-traditional students tend to have motivations that differ from those of their traditional counterparts, particularly in the field of social work.

Francois (2014) completed a study that explored the motivational aspects of the pursuit of higher education by non-traditional students of all majors. While not focused on social work, this study contends that non-traditional of several majors cite cognitive interest in the topic as a primary motivation for seeking a particular degree (Francois, 2014). Francois points out that cognitive interest is “indicative of the predominance of the concept of lifelong learning in the lived experience of the non-traditional adult student” (2014, p. 30). From this, one could deduct that life experience stimulates cognitive interest in a topic, which, in turn, motivates the pursuit of a particular profession.

When discussing the idea of gatekeeping procedures for social work education programs, Lafrance, Gray and Herbert (2004) suggest a need to consider personal and motivational factors as strongly as or more strongly than academic performance when considering applicants. They cite the tendency for students to withdraw due to other than academic reasons. Also discussed is

the tendency for previous psychosocial difficulties to be an influential factor leading non-traditional students to choose to pursue social work. (Lafrance et al., 2004). Rompf and Royce (1994) found that social work students that had experienced or witnessed family members or other loved ones with alcoholism or other forms of psychosocial dysfunction tend to identify those experiences as motivation for their career choice. As a result, students expressed a desire to choose a vocation that allowed them to work toward solutions to various social problems at micro and macro levels and, in turn, have a positive impact on society in general. (Rompf & Royce, 1994). Lafrance et al. (2004) contend that social work educators tend to be willing to accept applicants with these types of past difficulties due to the possibility that these students could use their struggles to enhance their self-awareness and gain unique understanding about dysfunctional behaviors. (Lafrance et al., 2004). Non-traditional social work students often have past experiences that were a result of troublesome behavior – either by themselves or others in their lives. Application of these experiences to the learning process can place the non-traditional student at an advantage when classwork requires critical thinking and self-reflection, particularly in the discipline of social work.

Kaufman, Agars and Lopez-Wagner (2008) also found non-academic motivations for students to attend college and be successful in their pursuits. Their research found that successful students have certain personality traits that drive their desire to obtain a degree. One of the traits highlighted to have direct impact on educational achievement was that of conscientiousness (Kaufman et al., 2008). The focus on their research was the non-traditional student and significant evidence was produced supporting the theory that factors other than academic performance were predictors of academic success and motivation (Kaufman, et al., 2008).

When comparing motivations of non-traditional students to those of traditional students, Eppler and Harju (1997) used concepts of learning goals and performance goals. Learning goals deal with the ability to overcome challenges through persistence and determination, while performance goals are focused on the outcome and not the challenges faced as a means to an end (Eppler & Harju, 1997). Through their study of motivations of both non-traditional and traditional students, they found that non-traditional students were motivated by the process of learning, while traditional students were more motivated by the desire to gain approval from others (Eppler & Harju, 1997). In addition, motivation for non-traditional students is typically not derailed by feelings of academic helplessness as often experienced by traditional students (Eppler & Harju, 1997). Although not immune to this feeling, non-traditional students that have other roles such as employee, parent, spouse and caregiver have reached a high level of confidence in other areas of life that tends to carry over to their academic pursuits (Eppler & Harju, 1997).

### **Life Experience of the Non-traditional Student**

**Demographics related to life experience.** David Hodge (2004) described some basic demographics of U.S. social workers, many directly related to life experience. Hodge (2004) found that twice as many social workers live in urban areas than rural areas; however, most reported living in a different location than they did as a teenager. A majority of social workers were found to be in favor of the right to free speech except when the speech is racist in nature (Hodge, 2004). Approximately 75% of social workers reported living in a racially diverse neighborhood (Hodge, 2004). Social workers were found to more likely be single than married, often as the result of divorce or separation (Hodge, 2004). Hodge concluded that this research could be used by social work educators to incorporate ways to fill in the gaps in the life experience of social work students.



Specific life experiences have been found to directly be linked to the choice of social work as a profession. Family and personal trauma, substance abuse in the student or family and witnessing or experiencing mental illness are among the life experiences have been cited as leading a student to pursue social work as a profession (Rompf & Royce, 1994).

**Family and Personal Trauma.** Traumatic experiences during childhood, adolescence or early adulthood have been found to have an influence on the choice of social work as a career. Rompf and Royce (1994) found that 44% of respondents reported living with parents that had an unhappy marriage. Thirty-seven percent of respondents reported experiencing or observing emotional difficulties within their families (Rompf & Royce, 1994). Instances of child abuse and/or neglect were reported in 17% of respondents (Rompf & Royce, 1994). This figure was found to be almost double that of students of other majors (Rompf & Royce, 1994). Thirty-nine percent of social work students surveyed reported that traumatic situations in their family of origin influenced their choice of major (Rompf & Royce, 1994).

Lemieux, Plummer, Richardson, Simon and Ai (2010) viewed traumatic experiences as tools for growth if used properly by social work students in a study that examined student survivors of Hurricane Katrina and how the resulting feelings linked to trauma experienced earlier in life. Just under half of the respondents reported symptoms of clinical depression following the experience; while 6% indicated symptoms recognized as those of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Approximately 20% of those surveyed indicated that they had turned to alcohol or other substances as a result of the feelings related to Hurricane Katrina (Lemieux et al., 2010). Lemieux et al. (2010) asserted that while these types of traumatic experiences and the choice of coping method could be a challenge to the non-traditional student, the potential for growth as a result of

such an experience is promising if applied appropriately, supporting the stance that life experience enhances the learning environment.

Methods of healthy coping with the Hurricane Katrina disaster were examined. 93% of the students reported participating in recovery efforts in a volunteer capacity, indicating a healthy avenue of coping with the traumatic event the ability to grow both personally and professionally despite the difficult circumstances (Lemieux et al., 2010). In addition to volunteering, respondents reported use of emotional support, self-distraction, acceptance, religion and humor as tools in the coping process (Lemieux et al., 2010). When discussing implications for social work educators, Lemieux et al., (2010) recommended providing avenues in the classroom that allow for growth of students despite traumatic experiences. Providing adequate education, supervision and assessment of student performance when consideration of past trauma should be the focus of educators in the social work classroom as a means of maximizing the potential of life experience to be an advantage to the learning process. (Lemieux et al., 2010).

**Substance Abuse.** When considering the practice implications for social workers from families of origin that had experienced alcoholism, Coombes and Anderson (2000) found that being the child of an alcoholic allowed for the development of skills that transferred well to the chosen profession. Skills such as caregiving, mediation, responsibility and parenting adapted well from the role as the child of an alcoholic to the role of social worker by the participants (Coombes & Anderson, 2000). In addition, Coombes and Anderson (2000) recognized the qualities of empathy, courage, resilience and a sense of hope among the social workers interviewed. All of these life experiences appeared to supply the social worker with skills needed for the profession.

Coombes and Anderson (2000) recommended that social work educators encourage students to closely examine their reasons for entering the profession. Students should avoid the

tendency to seek help for their unresolved issues by pursuing the profession and educators should be cognizant of that in students (Coombes & Anderson, 2000). A sense of self-awareness and knowledge of how personal experiences impact professional practice should be cultivated in the classroom and students should be aware of the importance of self-care when those experiences impact their work (Coombes & Anderson, 2000). When combined with teaching methods that incorporate life experience in a constructive manner, the non-traditional student can emerge from the higher education experience with a natural ability to succeed in the profession.

**Mental Illness.** A study of social work students diagnosed with various mental illnesses illustrated the challenges and positive impacts a mental health diagnosis has on the future practitioner and how those experiences enhance the learning process and prepare the student for the field. (Goldberg, Hadas-Lidor & Karnieli-Miller, 2015). The participating students had various diagnoses including: depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, eating disorder and personality disorder (Goldberg et al., 2015). The findings revealed that the participants in the study were making efforts to understand how their own mental health diagnosis could impact their professional role and had achieved a good level of awareness of the problems that could occur as a result (Goldberg et al., 2015).

While indicating an awareness of the potential pitfalls, students identified the positive impact that having a mental health diagnosis could have on their practice as a social worker. Empathetic communications with clients would likely come easily to these students, whether or not they revealed their own personal struggles to clients (Goldberg et al., 2015). The ability to see the helping relationship from the client's perspective due to their past experience was noted as a benefit to their diagnosis (Goldberg et al., 2015). All of the students in this study were exposed to mental health care as a client prior to becoming a social work student and indicated that the

educational process had provided a good foundation on which to make the transfer from client to helping professional (Goldberg et al., 2015). As indicated by Coombes and Anderson (2000), Goldberg et al. (2015) agree that social work educators can assist students with mental health issues become competent practitioners through adequate preparation and supervision throughout the educational process. The life experience of being a client of the mental health field can have a positive influence on the social work student that aspires to become a mental health professional.

### **Spiritual Experience of the Non-traditional Student**

The roots of social work trace back to the church. Jane Addams, considered one of the founders of the profession, felt led by her strong Quaker roots to be an advocate to those vulnerable due to poverty, victimization and other difficulties (Epple, 2012). In the tradition of Jane Addams, Irmgard Wessel was highly influenced by her Jewish background to pursue social work as a profession (Epple, 2012). A survivor of the holocaust, Wessel knew early on in life that she must help victims of similar traumatic experiences, influencing her choice of the social work field (Epple, 2012). She spent many years in clinical social work focused on helping individuals that had lost loved ones through traumatic circumstances, such as homicide (Epple, 2012). These are two examples of historically relevant social workers that used life experiences with a spiritual influence to motivate their desire to help others through the social work profession.

Burthwick (2000) found that 76% of the social workers surveyed indicated that they participated in personal spiritual or religious practices a minimum of two or three times per month. As a result of these findings, Burthwick (2000) contends that social work practitioners and students are influenced by religion and spirituality and desire an incorporation of those experiences in social work education. Burthwick (2000) suggests that educators allow for

students to explore their own religious and spiritual experiences and how they can be used in practice without causing bias. The author argues that spirituality as life experience should not be ignored in social work education, but rather, like other life experience, be explored and utilized to enhance the learning experience and preparation for the profession.

### **Implications for Social Work Educators**

Non-traditional students that pursue the field of social work are unique in their motivations, their depth of life experiences and history of spiritual influences. Regardless of what brings them to the social work field, non-traditional students come to higher education driven by their goals and eager to participate actively in the lives of members of vulnerable populations. Social work educators should be aware of these driving forces and use them to enhance the learning experience of the non-traditional student.

The traditional student also comes to the classroom with certain life experiences applicable to the social work field that can enhance the learning experience. However, the non-traditional student tends to have a richer, more in-depth reservoir of experience often simply due to the chronological age difference from the traditional student. Job experience, marriage, divorce, parenting, other forms of caregiving and more are often life experiences that the traditional student does not possess.

Educators in the social work field must find ways to address the unique challenges presented by non-traditional students through classroom content and supervision throughout the education process. In addition, the unique life experiences presented by non-traditional students should be applied so that they might be used as an advantage to both the individual student and others in the classroom.

Andrea Reupert (2009), described a group of activities to be used in the classroom in order to help students gain self-awareness and understand how their worldview and perspectives of various circumstances influence their reactions. Due to the possible risk of introduction of self into the helping relationship, Reupert (2009) emphasizes the importance of an intentional effort to provide self-awareness activities in the classroom so that the application of self in the helping relationship is done with awareness of personal boundaries and limitations. Reupert (2009) acknowledges that over use of self is not productive as is a total absence of use of self in helping relationships.

The approach suggested by Reupert (2009) illustrates the author's stance of life experience as advantageous to the social work education experience, yet highlights the need for proper education techniques to teach students how to properly apply that experience in the field. With proper boundaries and balance, life experiences can be used to complement the knowledge and skills learned throughout the social work curriculum to yield a competent and well-prepared practitioner.

### **Discussion**

While the impact of life experience on social workers both as students and in practice has been explored, the concept of life experience as an advantage to the non-traditional social work student has rarely, if ever, been addressed based on the findings of this author. As observed by the author in the classroom and substantiated by transformative learning theory, students with troubling life experiences of a social nature can use education as a tool for transformational life changes. In addition, life experience can serve as a motivating force for the non-traditional student to pursue and complete a degree in higher education.

In social work, non-traditional students are frequently drawn to the profession based on past experiences and want to help others in similar situations. These students have often been assisted by persons in helping professions in their time of struggle and are inspired to do the same for others, leading them to social work. Education becomes a tool used by these students to transform their lives. The author argues that the non-traditional student can be at an advantage for the profession due to life experiences and the motivation and passion for the field that result from them.

### **Implications for Social Work Education**

Social work education should embrace non-traditional students and the unique experiences they bring to the educational process. Educators should, however, be aware of the challenges non-traditional students face both from a logistical standpoint as well as challenges resulting from life experiences. Logistically, non-traditional students may need more orientation to classroom technology as well as library and other campus resources. When considering the life experiences of non-traditional students, educators need to take time to learn about students' stories and assess how those experience will impact their effectiveness in the profession.

The author has observed non-traditional students with various life experiences and their motivations to pursue social work. As a faculty member and advisor, the author has helped these students, some first generation college students, to navigate the higher education environment. In addition, the author has served as a mentor to non-traditional students as they discover how their worldview has been formed from their past experiences and how to appropriately apply those experiences to their education experience and future practice. With focused attention and support from faculty and advisors, non-traditional students are more likely to complete the degree process successfully and enter the workforce as competent practitioners.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research with the following goals is suggested: identifying unique needs and challenges of non-traditional social work students; development of tools for use by non-traditional students to more successfully navigate the higher education experience; and an exploration of techniques used by social work educators to incorporate life experience into the learning process.

Non-traditional students are included in orientations with traditional students in which subjects such as housing, homesickness and social opportunities are discussed. While beneficial to traditional students, these are not applicable to the non-traditional student that does not live on campus. Through research with non-traditional students, their unique concerns and anxieties about higher education could be identified. As a result orientation subject matter with a non-traditional student focus could be developed as a way of meeting the challenges and lessening the anxiety experienced.

In addition to non-traditional student-focused orientation, tools and resources could be developed to address the unique needs of this aspect of the student population. For example, the author has recognized a need for technology training resources for non-traditional students, particularly those that do not use technology in their day to day lives. Navigation of email, social media and university learning portals are among the challenges observed by the author and could be met through the use of a focused resource tool.

When considering social work education in particular, future research should expand on the application of life experience of non-traditional social work students into the classroom. In addition, the development of student self-awareness related to life experience should be explored and the importance of self-awareness in social work practice should be highlighted.



The author believes strongly, based on experience, that the non-traditional student has a unique advantage when pursuing social work as a career. Life experiences, both positive and negative, provide a natural sense of empathy and understanding for future clients. Social work educators have the opportunity to provide guidance to empower non-traditional students to not only complete their degree, but become exceptional practitioners in the field.

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Non-Traditional Social Work Students:

Motivations, Challenges and Keys to Success

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### Abstract

Non-traditional students are becoming more and more common in social work education. Life experiences related to the field of social work routinely serve as motivation for these students to pursue the discipline. Successful BSW and MSW graduates meeting predetermined criteria for the non-traditional student were interviewed about their journey in higher education as part of a qualitative study. Participants revealed motivations such as histories of abuse and addiction, caring for relatives with disabilities and experience with social service agencies as motivation for pursuing the profession. Also revealed were the unique challenges experienced as a student in higher education based on their non-traditional status. Balance of school, work and family along with financial and cognitive challenges required these participants to rely on various sources of support in order to be successful. By being aware of the unique qualities and concerns of non-traditional students, social work educators and others in higher education can work to make the college experience a successful one for these motivated learners.

*Keywords:* non-traditional social work students; motivations, challenges

The student body of a typical university is predominately made up of students in their late teens and early twenties who are just beginning to find their place in the world. They normally have few responsibilities to others than their coursework and possibly a part time job or work study position. These students tend to be financially dependent on one or both parents for their basic needs as well as for financial resources provide for a college education. Among these students are scattered a different group with unique characteristics and challenges – non-traditional students. This portion of the university population, while often overlooked, can bring a richness to the classroom that otherwise would be missing, particularly in the discipline of social work.

For the purposes of this research, a non-traditional student was identified as meeting two or more of the criteria established by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): “being independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependents, being a single caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, delaying postsecondary enrollment, attending school part time, and being employed full time” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 1). Along with these differences from the traditional student, non-traditional students have some unique motivations for college attendance. While the traditional student may attend due to parental and societal expectations, they typically do not identify other strong motivations. Non-traditional students often have multiple motivations for college attendance that do not resemble those of their traditional counterparts. “They see learning as a way to acquire new knowledge, help them with their professional advancement, contribute to their community and satisfy at the same time some external expectations” (Francois, 2014). While this description depicts the motivations of the non-traditional student in general, the research does not show specific motivations as expressed by the non-traditional social work major.

Non-traditional students of social work have been observed by the researcher, a social work educator, to have an added dimension of motivation for pursuit of a social work degree separate from the motivations of students of other disciplines. Life experiences such as histories of abuse, past addiction, foster care placement, juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy and caregiving responsibilities are just some of the examples of students in the researcher's classroom. The life experiences that accompany non-traditional social work students have been observed by the researcher to bring a dimension of richness to the classroom that leads to unique opportunities for learning for both the non-traditional and traditional students. Having experienced some of the social issues discussed throughout the social work curriculum, non-traditional students can enrich not only their own experience but the experiences of their classmates in a given course. This comes through self-disclosure, self-awareness, self-reflection and being receptive to feedback and input from others.

Non-traditional students routinely perform well in both the classroom and the field, often as a direct result of their past life experiences. Social work educators should have a heightened awareness of the unique qualities and needs of non-traditional students for two reasons: to encourage these students to apply their life experience in ways that enhance their experience as they acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for the field, and to heighten their awareness of the unique challenges these students face during the educational process.

A phenomenological study of successful social work graduates meeting the pre-determined criteria for non-traditional students was completed by the researcher. The impact of life experience on career choice was explored. In addition, the impact of life experience and status as a non-traditional student was considered when discussing the social work education process. The following questions and more were addressed: How do significant life experiences



motivate students to pursue social work? How do those experiences help or hinder the educational process? What specific challenges do non-traditional students face? How do they overcome those challenges and succeed in their educational pursuits?

### **Literature Review**

Non-traditional students are a steadily growing segment of the higher education student population. The non-traditional student is typically over 25 and has life responsibilities other than college such as, but not limited to: full time or part time employment, a spouse or significant other, children and civic duties. The field of social work is particularly pursued by non-traditional students in that they often come to the discipline following life experiences that have influenced them to seek a helping profession. A recent survey of literature on the topic revealed information related to the motivations and challenges of non-traditional students, what is needed to engage them and prevent attrition and specific interventions some institutions have put in place to serve this classification of higher education student.

#### **Motivations of the Non-traditional Student**

What motivates the non-traditional student to pursue higher education? Francois (2014) suggests that these students are often in a time of life transition such as divorce, loss of employment or change in residence location. Others may want to improve their standing at a current job or make a total career change (Francois, 2014). These students tend to have a higher sense of self-esteem and a higher level of motivation than their traditional classmates (Francois, 2014).

Non-traditional students are frequently also first generation students. When researching motivational factors among these students, Gibbons and Woodside (2014) found three themes of motivation to attend college. The role of the father as a motivator was found to have significant

influence on the decision to attend college. Many of the research subjects told of fathers who worked difficult blue-collar jobs and spent time encouraging their children to find something better for themselves (Gibson & Woodside, 2014). In addition, these students verbalized their desire for a meaningful career and the expectation that college could provide that also played roles in their motivation to pursue higher education (Gibson & Woodside, 2014).

### **Challenges of the Non-traditional Student**

Challenges and obstacles encountered by non-traditional students in the higher education setting were explored at two Portuguese Universities by Fragoso, Goncalves, Ribeiro, Monteiro and Quintas (2013). This three year project was approached from the perspective of the students' lives as being in a transitional phase that required "adjustment to new life circumstances" and that this and any other life transition does not always occur in a smooth manner. (Fragoso, et. al, 2013). Four main difficulties faced by non-traditional students were identified: the need to balance home and work life with coursework; struggles with self-confidence due to level of academic ability; students that as parents must deal with their children's struggles in educational transitions; and lack of understanding of evaluation methods and forms of feedback given in the classroom (Fragoso, et. al, 2013)

As a result of these and other challenges, the attrition rates of non-traditional students tend to be high. Family responsibilities, financial concerns, employment issues are all risk factors of non-traditional student attrition. With growing numbers of these students attending college, universities are increasingly becoming aware of the challenges and are looking at ways to promote persistence.

Gail Markle of Kennesaw State University in Georgia (2015) completed a project in which she explored qualities of non-traditional students that contributed to their completion of a

degree. While no demographic link to academic success was found, higher grade point average, part time enrollment and overall self-confidence were found to be influential factors (Markle, 2015).

### **The Role of Academia in the Success of Non-traditional Students**

So how do universities aid in the persistence of non-traditional students? Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) addressed this question in a study involving 228 students enrolled at an Italian university. The non-traditional students in the study attributed their persistence to a number of factors but most common were: taking advantage of supportive services at the institution, positive interaction with faculty and the social support of classmates (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Social relationships and support from both classmates and faculty were a consistent positive influence on non-traditional students in the study while traditional students did not identify these types of relationships as influential (2011).

Linda Wyatt of Northeast State Community College in Tennessee (2011) echoes the findings of Gilardi and Guglielmetti by reiterating that engagement on a social level is crucial to the success of non-traditional students. In addition, Wyatt also agrees that non-traditional students can benefit from ongoing assistance on an academic level (Wyatt, 2011). She found that non-traditional students would welcome a non-traditional student organization for purposes of support and community creation. Other practical considerations desired by non-traditional students as discovered by Wyatt (2011) included: more comfortable chairs in classrooms, assistance with technology deficits and a demonstrated awareness by faculty of the challenges faced by non-traditional students.

Three specific examples of approaches to accommodating the needs of non-traditional students were found in the literature. Ismail (2009) completed a study on the library needs of

students in a satellite campus MSW program at Marywood University in Pennsylvania. It was found that these students were either unaware of the various library resources available to them or were not satisfied with some of the services provided by the library (Ismail, 2009). In response to these findings, the university expanded library weekend hours and other services for student convenience and developed an online library orientation for satellite campus students (Ismail, 2009). In a similar study, Miller and Lu (2003) explored the needs of non-traditional students in the online classroom. Their research led them to the assertion that faculty members in online environments must be aware of how the learning styles and needs of non-traditional students differ from their traditional counterparts (2003). Based on several suggestions regarding pedagogy and course delivery, Miller and Lu (2003) explored ways to address non-traditional student learning in online education.

A 2002 study by Mairead Owen explored a personal tutoring program and its impact on non-traditional students at a university in Liverpool, England. With the ultimate goal of a “straightforward passage through university” (Owen, 2002), the personal tutor system provides assistance to students regarding academic challenges as well as other challenges including adequate housing, financial issues and emotional and relationship concerns. Through this holistic approach, the student is supported through the educational process regardless of where the obstacles and barriers to that process originate.

Non-traditional students have become a constant presence in university life. They have life situations that bring unique challenges to their efforts to participate in higher education. By taking an active role in support of these students, university faculty, support staff and administration not only help them succeed but also contribute to the success of their university and to the academy as a whole.

## **Method**

A descriptive phenomenological approach was used. This method was chosen in order to provide the best opportunity to allow for the participants to share the meaning of their experiences in their own words – to allow them to describe their unique perspective on both their motivations for pursuing the profession and their experience of completing a degree as a non-traditional student.

## **Sample**

Ten successful graduates who met the pre-determined criteria for non-traditional college students were interviewed for this project. All participants chosen for interviews had bachelor degrees, five had master degrees and two were enrolled in a master degree program at the time of data collection. All received their degrees from the same institution within the five years prior to the interviews. All degrees were in the discipline of social work.

Seven women and three men ranging in age from 27 to 57 compromised the participant sample. Seven of the participants were married, two were divorced and one had never been married at the time of interview. All participants were parents and one participant was a grandparent. Three participants were single parents. The participants were all Caucasian and identified as heterosexual. All participants but one were working in the field of social work at the time of the interview.

## **Data Collection**

A convenience sampling approach was used in this initial effort at what is anticipated will become a more long-term project that will allow for a larger and more diverse participant sample. Future efforts will incorporate a quantitative approach with the participant sample selected from multiple universities providing for a more diverse participant group. For this

project, students were recruited from a list of recent graduates from a social work program in rural Kentucky. Potential participants were selected based on pre-determined criteria for non-traditional students. Individuals were contacted by phone or email to solicit their participation in the project.

Interviews were conducted at the place of employment of either the researcher or the participant. Time length of the interviews averaged 45-60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format with a predetermined list of questions.

Questions covered areas such as reasons for not attending college at a traditional age, factors motivating the return to education and inspiration to pursue the field of social work. In addition, challenges of being a non-traditional student and specific things the participants did to overcome those challenges were explored. Finally the researcher asked each participant to give advice to other non-traditional students pursuing higher education. The researcher asked follow up questions based on participant answers to the predetermined questions. All interviews were audio taped.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was approached using methods typically found in qualitative, phenomenological studies. Gibbons and Woodside (2014) utilized interviews to determine common themes among non-traditional students when relaying their experiences. West, Fleming and Finnegan (2013) relied heavily on direct quotes from their non-traditional student participants to describe the essence of the experience. Procedures for this endeavor were similar to these previous research efforts.

Interview recordings were transferred from the recording device to digital files for storage immediately following each interview. Contents of the audio files were transcribed into

Word documents by the researcher. The transcribed interviews were then read several times by the researcher – first to determine the essence of the data as a whole, then to sort the data into commonly occurring themes. Notes were made as interviews were read in order to begin the process of analyzing and organizing the data.

As themes emerged, a process of open coding was introduced as a means of categorizing the responses of participants into categories or themes. Statements of the participants supporting those themes were identified. Direct quotes of the participants were selected as appropriate for use to support each theme. This process was completed using a basic method of color coding statements found in the printed documents through the use of different color highlighters.

Data analysis in this project primarily used an inductive approach. The words and meanings of the words used by participants in the interviews were used to arrive at the themes recognized in the project. The researcher approached the analysis in an open manner and allowed the data from the interviews form the findings of the project. The questions asked of the participants were written in a manner that did not suggest a direction for their responses. This approach allowed for the true essence of the experience to develop during the course of the research.

### **Protection of Human Participants**

The researcher completed the IRB process through the committee at the university at which she is a faculty member. The project qualified for expedited review according to university policy and that process was completed without difficulty. IRB approval was granted prior to the commencement of data collection.

An Informed Consent document was completed by all participants prior to each interview. An approved template form for obtaining informed consent by the IRB and was

adapted for the purposes of this project by the researcher. The document explained the purposes of the research, how responses would be utilized and measures that would be taken to protect participant confidentiality. The document also informed participants of their ability to withdraw from participation at any time during the process. Prior to the participants signing the document, the researcher discussed informed consent and answered any related questions.

This study provided the participants with an open setting in which to share experiences related to their status as a non-traditional students. The interviews were structured in a manner that allowed for the results to emerge during the process. Non-traditional students are composing a larger percentage of student bodies throughout higher education. Being aware of their unique challenges is important for faculty and administrators in order to serve the needs of this aspect of the university student body.

The small scale of the project contributed to its limitations. Participants were selected from one university leading to a lack of diversity, particularly in the areas of race and sexual identity. In addition, all students resided in a rural area. While there was diversity in age, gender, marital and socioeconomic statuses, future efforts should target participants that allow for a greater sense of diversity. In addition, selection of participants from disciplines other than social work could allow for a different perspective on the experience of the non-traditional student. A mixed methods study that also incorporates a quantitative approach would allow for a larger group of participants, providing a more broad understanding of the experience of non-traditional college students.

## **Results**

The motivations and life experiences that lead non-traditional students to pursue social work as a profession were a central focus of this study. The researcher also endeavored to



determine the challenges a student's status brings to the educational experience. Finally, what these students do to overcome those challenges was explored.

To understand the background of each student, initial questions focused on the reasoning behind and/or reasons for the delay in the pursuit of higher education. During the course of data collection this delay became what the researcher referred to as the "gap" in their education. Becoming a parent at a young age, caregiving responsibilities for ill relatives, personal illness or injury, poor academic performance and alcohol/drug use were some of the reasons given for that gap.

When referring to his early attempt at college one respondent stated, "I learned to party and that was about it". Another stated, "I was just lazy and burned out on school". Almost all of the female participants referred to marriage and motherhood as the reason for the gap. One discovered she was pregnant while in her second semester of college as a traditional age student, leading to the delay in her education. Another participant did not complete high school due to an unanticipated pregnancy, but eight years later achieved her GED for the purpose of enrolling in higher education.

At least three of the respondents found themselves in the "sandwich generation" early in adulthood – caring for ailing parents or grandparents at the same time as they were raising young children. These responsibilities contributed to the delay in their educational pursuits. One stated, "I became not only the caregiver for my son, but for my grandmother too". Another stated,

"When my kids were 3 and 5, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. I took care of her for two years until her death all while trying to keep a job and raise my children. I lost my job due to numerous absences but I had to care for them. That was my priority at the time."

Despite these delays, all of these students eventually returned to higher education and were successful at completing degrees in social work. The motivation students found to make the return to college and life experiences that led non-traditional students to pursue social work as a profession were the primary focus of this study. The researcher also explored the challenges the nontraditional student brings to the educational experience. Finally, what these students do to overcome those challenges was explored.

### **Motivations of the Non-traditional Student**

**Motivation to pursue higher education.** Most participants had attended some college earlier in life, so the motivation to return was explored. Overwhelmingly, participants referred to some kind of life transition as a motivating factor to return to pursue a college degree. The end of a marriage, loss of a job and changing caregiving responsibilities were among the most commonly mentioned life transitions contributing to the decisions to pursue higher education.

One female participant pointed to the end of her marriage and turning 40 in the same year as motivating factors prompting her to return to college after a 20 year absence. She recalled a conversation with herself as she spent her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday home alone:

“I thought to myself, ‘this is not where you said you would be at this point in life when you were 18’. I had thought about it plenty of times, going back to school, but my plate was full with everything. I went to the school’s website and I thought ‘I can do this’. So I filled out my application online that night.”

The loss of a job through company closure, layoff or other situations led to a return to the college classroom for several of the respondents. One participant was six months from retirement from a state government job position when he experienced a layoff. Another respondent was laid off from her position as a medical billing clerk when all of those jobs were moved to a corporate

office several states away. She stated "...at that point I didn't know what to do and that's when I went back to school". After his high paying sales position ended when the company closed, a participant stated that "to get close to earning that much money again, I knew I was going to have to get a degree".

Five respondents found the opportunity to attend college presented itself to them following a change in caregiving responsibilities – often in the form of small children entering school. One respondent who was caring for a young child and an ill grandmother returned to school following her grandmother's recovery and her son's entry into preschool. Another participant's mother's death from cancer and her children entering their teenage years relieved another participant of caregiving duties, leading to her return to higher education.

Children finding their independence and resulting lack of dependence on their mother motivated another respondent to return to college. She stated:

"It was a more of an 'I'm bored' kind of thing. I mean the kids had [driving] permits, they were becoming independent. They had after school jobs and activities. There was a lot of time that I was just sitting. I was bored out of my mind. I've always loved to read and I've always loved to learn. So it didn't phase me a bit to go back to school."

**Motivations to pursue social work.** Participants overwhelmingly referred to past life experience as a motivator in their choice of the profession of social work. Those experiences were split into two different areas. One group of participants pointed to their own personal struggles and the desire to help people in similar situations as a motivator for pursuing the field. Another group referred to their experiences in caring for someone else and the resulting exposure to the field of social work as motivation for pursuit of a degree in the field.

“I needed help when I was younger” was the statement of a respondent who chose the field to help others with similar backgrounds. She expanded on that statement:

“I was suicidal from the age of 11-ish to 17. I wanted to die and I just begged for the strength to kill myself. I would hold knives to my wrist and just prayed that I would have the guts to cut down. I had a lot of stressors in my life. There was a lot of verbal and emotional abuse – some physical abuse – mainly verbal and emotional. I had no self-esteem and there was no – life was pointless and too painful. So as I got older and decided to go into social work – I believe that was my main purpose – to help people not feel like that.”

Another participant also experienced a desire to help individuals like herself through the social work field. She described a very hurtful childhood that led to a rebellious time during her teenage years. She stated “...whenever I got into my teenage years I started the whole rebellion thing and I didn’t want to listen to anybody. It was my way or no way”. Helping children in similar situations and preventing some of the risky behaviors that were triggered by her rebellion were motivating factors in her choice of the social work profession.

One particularly inspiring participant entered college after becoming sober after 30 years of alcohol and drug addiction. He stated that he knew his purpose going into the field was to help those experiencing the same struggles. He recognized the growing need for professionals in the drug and alcohol treatment field and felt strongly that someone with his past experience was best equipped for that sort of work. He stated:

“I have always found, that not only is my abuse of substances an issue – that’s just one small issue. Those of us who do abuse substances meet the criteria for a great number of mental disorders. I have always been fascinated with mental

health and human behavior. So in an effort to help God fix me, I wanted to learn as much as I could about the field of human behavior and those kind of things and hopefully pass that along to others.”

Some respondents described their choice of social work as “just what I was supposed to do” and pointed to “helping people – people that had been knocked down” as motivators to pursue the field. It became evident during the course of this research that past life experiences are a great motivating factor for choosing the field, particularly among non-traditional students. The need to help others garnered through that life experience was very important to the respondents that relayed their own struggles to the researcher.

### **Challenges to Degree Completion**

All participants communicated that completing their degree as a non-traditional student was challenging. Financial strain while in school, poor ability to retain information and time management issues were described as challenges for these students. The complexity of the life of the non-traditional student seemed to be a contributing factor to the challenges encountered.

**Financial Challenges.** The loss of a job led to the return to school for one participant; however, it also led to a financial struggle during the time she was working toward a degree. While her family was able to provide for basic necessities with her husband’s income, the extras to which her family had become accustomed were difficult to provide. “I have a stepdaughter who was very dependent on my income because that’s where her extras came from – prom dresses and that kind of thing” she stated.

Another participant relayed her financial challenges, “I mean financially it was a struggle – I had to take loans out for all of it but I did have AmeriCorp money that paid about \$10,000 so that helped”. Likewise, a male student also faced financial difficulty while pursuing his degree,

despite working full time. In the past he had worked two jobs; however school did not allow time for that. He stated, “That was one of my biggest challenges – the money end – the inability to have an a semblance of a life that we used to have”. He continued by discussing how he and his wife knew that the financial sacrifice was temporary and having no kids at home made the strain easier to bear than it would have been otherwise.

**Cognitive Challenges.** Several of the participants discussed the mental challenges of higher education. The two oldest respondents pointed to these types of challenges as the greatest challenges they faced. One participant discussed his struggles with ADHD and the ability to stay focused on work. That challenge led to him experiencing anxiety throughout the college experience. He described that as a significant challenge and one the he was proud to have overcome in order to be successful.

Another participant, when asked what his greatest challenge was to degree completion replied, “Retaining information. That’s got to be it. I was pretty good at schoolwork and writing papers and that sort of thing but retaining information was the ‘toughy’. That’s probably the most challenging thing”. He continued by saying that remembering large amounts of information for exams was something he struggled with throughout.

**Time Challenges.** The most frequently mentioned challenges involved time management and balancing time spent on homework, other responsibilities and with family. Participants described it as a “balancing act” to divide their time between all the parts of their lives in a way that made them and the people important to them happy. Despite wanting to participate actively in the higher education process, participants often felt guilty if they spent too much time doing so.

Students who were single parents seemed to have the most difficulty with managing their time in a way that was fair to both their children and their efforts in college. One participant stated,

“My son was the most challenging. Having to focus on school work instead of spending time with him and I was always stressed out about deadlines and due dates and papers and taking time away from him. So it was really hard to balance being a mom and trying to be a student”.

Another single mom described her time issues as a need to balance everything in her life:

“Schedule balance. Just trying to balance all your responsibilities. There were nights when I was up half the night and I had to turn right around the next day and get (my son) up and get him to preschool and then have a couple hours to myself to get what I needed done and then I was right back picking him up from preschool and then it was over and over – a cycle.”

Single parents were not alone in their time challenges. Two participants who were married during their time as a student also expressed difficulty with time management and responsibility balance. One participant described her lack of time for all her responsibilities as causing her to “give up control” – something she did not take lightly. She stated, “I’m the type that does everything...so in class sometimes I was worried – Did my husband bathe the kids? What did he feed them?”. Another married parent described her experience as follows:

“For me the challenge was making time for my family. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to spend that time with them, because that is what I craved, but I was the type that when that syllabus was handed to me I wanted to work from start to finish and complete it. My kids would call it, ‘Mom’s in her zone’.

Non-traditional students have challenges that are unique to them. Non-traditional students are routinely financially responsible for themselves, their family and their education, contributing to financial strain. These responsibilities compete for their time, causing understandable stress during the education process.

### **Meeting the Challenges – Keys to Success**

All of the participants were successful social work graduates despite the challenges they faced. The researcher explored what the participants felt contributed to their success. Sources of support, organizational skills, a relaxed attitude and pure determination were among the factors participants identified as contributing to their ability to complete their degrees.

**Support of Family and Friends.** Half of the respondents expressed that support from family and friends was a key factor in their ability to be successful in their pursuit of higher education. Some students found their parents to be sources of support. One single parent stated that her parents “were my backbone” during her time in school by helping with her children when she was in class by picking them up at school, athletic practices and games.

Another participant who was a parent to a young child and caregiver for an elderly family friend during her time as a student found support from both her husband and parents. “My husband was behind me 110%” she stated. This participant’s mother was a particularly strong source of support:

“My parents – especially my mom-were a huge support, especially after my daughter was born. She would keep her when I had class at night and I would go home and there would be supper sitting on the table or the laundry would be done or the kitchen floor would be mopped. She paid a lady to come clean my house every two weeks. So those kinds of things were done for me.”



Friendship was a source of support for another participant. In this student's case, her friends were also her fellow students. She formed friendships with two classmates and those relationships quickly became crucial sources of support. She stated, "There were often times I wanted to jump out of that boat. I couldn't have done it without support from my friends".

**Organization and Time Management.** Time issues were mentioned by a majority of participants as a challenge to completing their degree due to multiple responsibilities held by non-traditional students. The ability to manage these responsibilities and the time they require was a key to success among the participants in this study. Several students shared how they met this challenge.

A single mom who described her biggest challenge as the loss of time spent with her son spoke about making the most of the time she did have with him. "...when I would have a break from school just really spending a lot of time with him and doing things to make it up. Then when I graduated I took him to Disney World to thank him and to celebrate". Another single mother discussed the guilt and stress she felt about the loss of time spent with her young son. She described her reaction to that. "There were nights when I just sat and cried for hours. I wouldn't even know why I was crying but the release felt so good so I just did it".

A mom with two active teenagers discussed how the family managed their busy schedules. "It was timers on my phone, the kids setting timers on their phones to keep our schedules." This participant also described how she made time for family. "They (kids) would come home every day about 4:00. If I had no classes that night I would stop what I was doing and it would be family time after that." This mother explained that often it was hard to interrupt homework with deadlines looming but she felt it was important to be dedicated to the idea of having quality family time.

Being organized was also mentioned by some of the participants as key to their ability to be successful. One student explained her method of organization:

“I made lots of lists and had lots of calendar use. The first thing I would do every semester as soon as the syllabus would come out – I would go through it week by week and I would write down the days that everything was due – discussion boards posts, quizzes, you name it. If I didn’t have that, I would have been lost.”

Several participants had more individualized factors that they attributed to their successful degree completion. One participant became willing to “let things go” such as laundry and housework. Another described himself as struggling with being overwhelmed, particularly when faced with a syllabus at the beginning of a semester. To combat those feelings he said he decided that “I’m just going to take it one assignment at a time, because you can’t climb the world’s tallest mountain without taking one step at a time”.

Other participants found strength and support from within themselves. One described himself as having “a standard that I held myself up to” and as being “very devoted to my schoolwork – it wasn’t just something I would do just to pass through the program”. Referring back to his years as a carpenter, he stated “I take pride in the finished product” and “I just always wanted to produce really good work”.

Finally, as with many non-traditional students, one student simply felt that her success happened because she wanted it to happen. She set a goal and really wanted to accomplish that goal for herself. When asked how she met the challenges of degree completion, she replied, “I guess just faith and determination. I don’t know. I’ve always been one that doubted myself and I wanted it. I just wanted it”.

## Discussion

Students who meet the non-traditional criteria bring with them characteristics that set them apart from the traditional college student. These characteristics can be an asset or liability, depending on how the student applies them to the college experience. When looking specifically at the social work major, non-traditional students routinely turn past difficult experiences into motivation to pursue a degree in an effort to not only improve their lives, but the lives of others.

Challenges faced by non-traditional students are also unique to this group. Having responsibilities and barriers that differ from those of the traditional student require that the non-traditional student make different sacrifices and adjustments in their lives in order to be successful. Meeting these challenges is key to the success of non-traditional students.

### Comparing Findings to the Literature

**Motivation for Pursuit of Higher Education.** When considering motivations for returning to education, some similarities were found to the literature. Several study participants found themselves in a period of life transition such as job loss, divorce or relief from caregiving responsibilities for children or others as motivation for attending college. This was similar to the findings of Fragoso, et. al (2013).

Differing motivations for attending college were also found. Life experiences were revealed as a motivator for the desire to pursue social work by the majority of participants. Past histories of abuse, drug addiction and experience with social services as a client were all described as motivators for pursuit of the field. The desire to help others based on those life experiences was highlighted by several participants.

**Challenges Faced.** When considering the various challenges faced by non-traditional students, participants in this study confirmed the findings of Fragoso et. al (2013) by highlighting

time management and maintaining a balance in their lives as the greatest challenge to attending college. Over half of respondents mentioned this as their primary challenge. Fragoso et. al (2013) listed time management as the top challenge among students in their research. This is a logical finding given the added responsibilities of the nontraditional student when compared to their traditional age peers. Also revealed as challenges in both this research and the Fragoso et. al (2013) study were financial stressors, struggles with academic/cognitive abilities and meeting the needs of children.

**Challenges Met through Support.** Ways in which students overcome challenges were similar in that both this study and the literature suggest sources of support as being key in student success. Where the literature and this study differ is in the source of that support. The literature focuses on academia as sources of support for non-traditional students – including offerings such as tutoring, faculty interaction and organizations specifically designed for non-traditional students. What this study found was that the student participants suggested that their greatest supports were from their social networks of family, friends and fellow students. This type of support along with time management, organization and pure determination were all credited by the participants in this study as contributing to their success. While both the literature and this study indicate that support is crucial for non-traditional student success, the sources of that support is an area in which these findings differ from the literature. The participants of this study were students at a satellite campus that did not allow for easy access to main campus support services such as tutoring and writing assistance. That missing component contributed to the differences between much of the literature and the participants in this study as the typical university supports were not as readily available.

## **Implications for Teaching**

Social work faculty often view their teaching and interactions with students as a form of practice. This is true for the researcher in this study and the reason for the focus of this project. Non-traditional students are routinely drawn to the field of social work and make excellent practitioners upon completion of their degrees.

Faculty in all disciplines should be aware of the motivations that bring a non-traditional student to academia in order to better understand their perspectives and worldviews. Social work faculty, in particular, should make efforts to learn about the life experiences of non-traditional students that motivate them to enter the field. By doing so, faculty can take measures to encourage self-reflection and self-awareness among these students in order to prevent bias and enmeshment in the practice setting. Students should be encouraged to become aware of their ability to practice with certain populations without allowing past life experiences, particularly negative ones, to impair their ability to practice in a competent manner.

Time management was a common theme that should be addressed when efforts are made to assist non-traditional students. Workshops or mentoring by upper classmen regarding the subject could be advantageous in addressing this common concern. In addition, similar efforts focused on writing skills, grammar basics and APA formatting would be beneficial to the non-traditional student. Creating opportunities for non-traditional students to learn these basic skills formally and from interaction with their classmates is a way in which faculty could support this segment of the student population.

Faculty and university administration can potentially improve their services by being aware of the challenges faced by non-traditional students. Faculty can serve in a mentoring capacity by meeting one on one with students who are struggling and helping them navigate the

degree process while dealing with other life responsibilities. A willingness to listen with understanding and empathy is often very helpful to the non-traditional student that is going through a difficult time.

At the institutional level, focused efforts tailored to non-traditional students can be utilized to encourage student success. Tutoring, library, financial aid and other traditional university services can develop offerings to specifically address the needs of the non-traditional student. The first step is the realization of what those challenges are and how the services that are offered to traditional students may not meet the needs of the non-traditional student population.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study focused on the essence of the experience from a small group (n=10) of non-traditional students in a social work program at a Christian university in a rural area in the southeast United States. The small nature of the study allowed the researcher to explore the experiences of the students in an in-depth manner. By doing so, the words of the students were able to be the focus of the findings and to be understood in some depth. Many previous studies have been approached from the perspective of the university and its understanding of the needs of non-traditional students.

Weaknesses of the study were primarily demographic in nature. The students were all Caucasian, heterosexual, graduates of the same university and living in the same rural region. In order to broaden the findings, students with more diverse demographics should be approached for their contributions. This would likely allow for not only more data, but more suggestions on how to better serve this aspect of the student population, one that continues to grow across university campuses. This may affect the degree to which findings from this study may be generalized beyond this setting.

## **Implications for Future Research**

As stated previously, future studies would include a more diverse demographic base of non-traditional student. This could be accomplished by expanding the study to include other universities. To allow for the greatest diversity among participants, universities chosen should be diverse as well – public, private, urban, rural, faith based and secular, large and small institutions should be included. In addition to individual interviews, focus groups could be utilized to encourage greater discussion on the topic.

With the growth of online programs and their popularity among non-traditional students, a quantitative study allowing for a larger number of participants could be done through electronic methods. Qualitative data from previous efforts could be used in constructing a quantitative instrument for electronic distribution. While expanding the knowledge on the non-traditional student, the impact of online education could also be included.

When focusing on social work students in particular, future studies could look more deeply into the life experiences of the non-traditional student. How do students with traumatizing life experiences approach their studies and their work following completion of their degree? What specific challenges do these past events have on social work practice? How do these practitioners learn to set aside any biases, if at all? What are the ramifications for clients?

## **Conclusion**

Non-traditional students are attracted to the field of social work in large numbers and with a variety of motivations. The main purpose for this study was to explore the motivations for non-traditional students to pursue social work; particularly how life experiences contribute to the choice of the field. Life experience as motivation is a perspective that has not been addressed thoroughly in existing literature. The researcher was interested in how life experiences,

particularly those traumatic in nature, lead non-traditional students to pursue social work as a vocation and how lessons learned from those past experiences can be applied to enhance their quality as a practitioner. The participants in this study had a variety of life experiences, yet all could point to something in their past that led them to pursue social work. That was an anticipated and important finding. In addition, the resiliency these former students had gained from past experiences contributed to their ability to overcome various challenges and complete their degrees. As one participant, when asked how his past life experiences prepared him for obtaining his degree and entering social work practice, relayed, “I think all of that set me up for all of this – I had to be able to overcome”.

Faculty and administration personnel in social work programs need to be aware of the challenges faced by non-traditional social work students as well as past life experiences that impact their choice of social work as they engage with them throughout the educational process. By doing so in an intentional manner, competent practitioners can emerge from the university experience prepared to help, empower and inspire others.



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“I’ve Been There”: Life Experience and the  
Non-traditional Social Work Student

Anne Adcock

St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas

### Abstract

Students that do not transition directly from high school to higher education do so for a variety of reasons – family responsibilities, financial concerns, family history of not attending college, deciding to pursue employment that does not require a college degree, or simply not wanting to attend college. Change in life circumstances, job loss, greater financial stability and desire for career change are among the reasons students begin college at later than the traditional age and with different life circumstances than the traditional student. The field of social work routinely attracts non-traditional students as they desire to use their own life experiences to help others through the field. A qualitative study was completed using a phenomenological approach. This research was accepted for a roundtable discussion at the 2017 annual conference of Bachelor Program Directors (See Appendix A). Study results were presented regarding the phenomenon of non-traditional social work students, their life experiences that motivated them to pursue the profession, and their challenges to degree completion. Also discussed were steps social work faculty can take to help foster success among this aspect of the student population. Opportunity for discussion among attendees was provided.

*Keywords:* Non-traditional student, life experience, social work, motivation, challenges

### Presentation Abstract

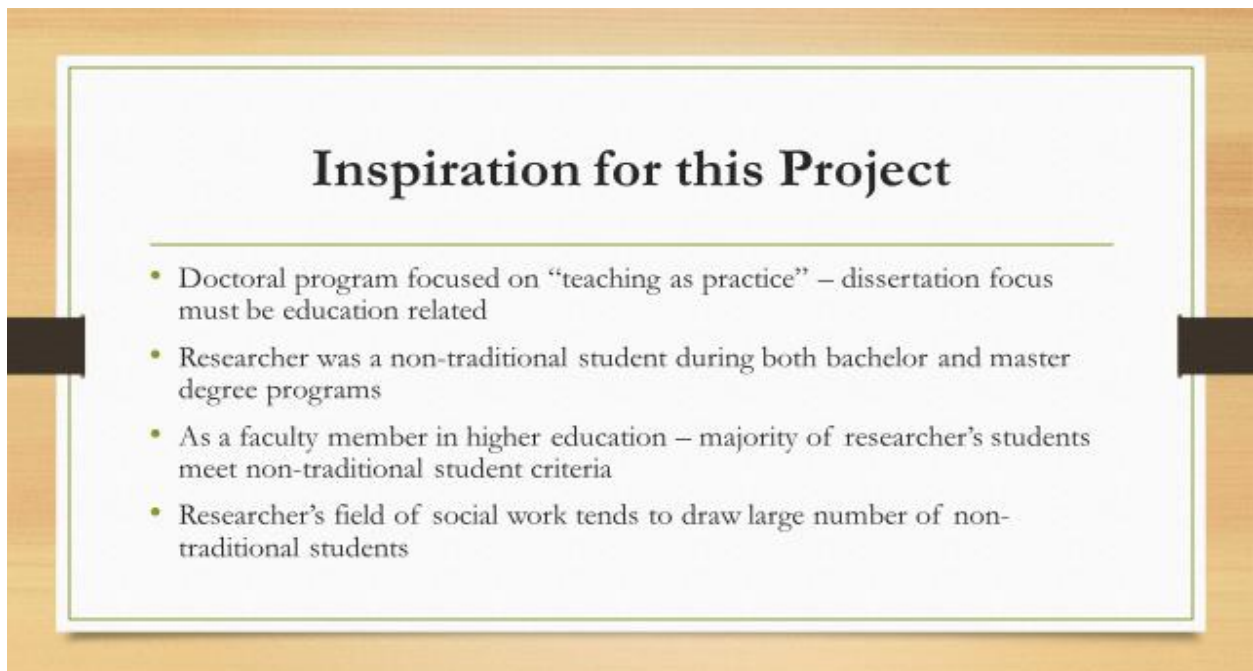
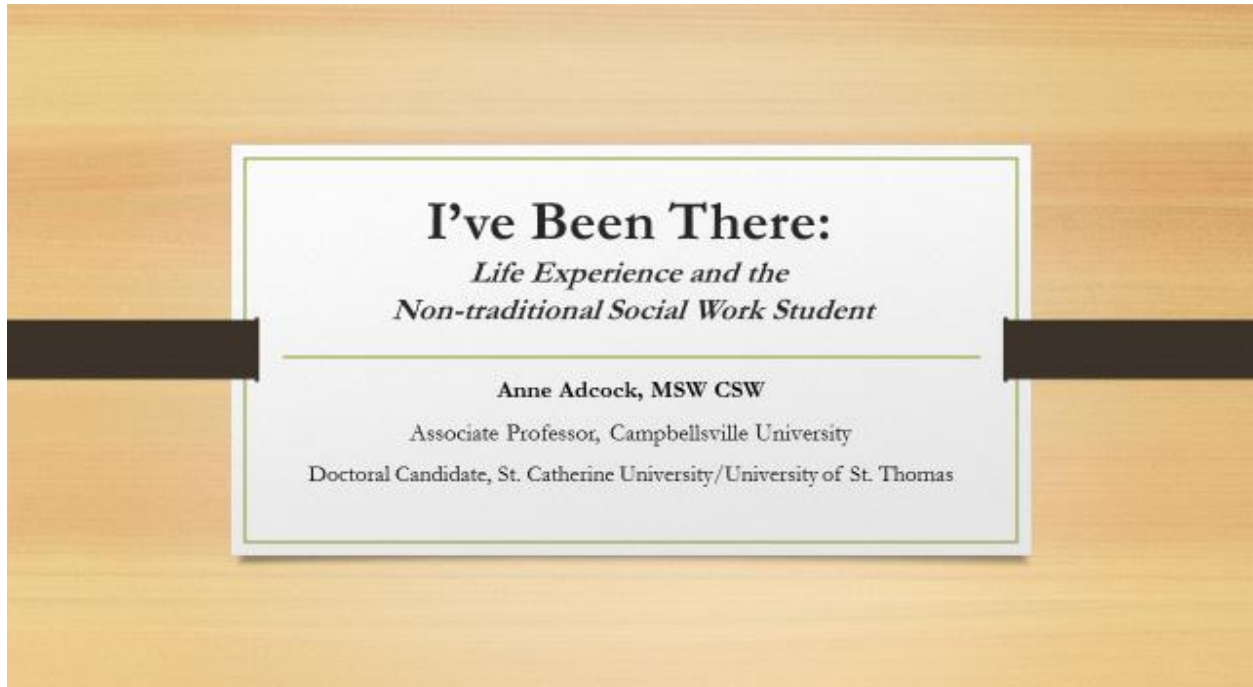
Non-traditional students are a constant presence in social work programs. The research study discussed in this presentation examined the phenomenon of non-traditional social work students. For the purposes of this research, a non-traditional student was identified as meeting two or more of the criteria established by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): “being independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependents, being a single caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, delaying postsecondary enrollment, attending school part time, and being employed full time” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 1). Along with these differences from the traditional student, non-traditional students have different motivations for college attendance. While the traditional student may attend due to parent and society expectations, they typically do not have other strong motivations. The motivations of non-traditional students have been found to be wide ranging: “they see learning as a way to acquire new knowledge, help them with their professional advancement, contribute to their community and satisfy at the same time some external expectations” (Francois, 2014).

Non-traditional students of social work have been observed by the researcher, a social work educator, to have an added dimension of motivation for attending pursuit of a social work degree. Life experiences such as histories of abuse, past addiction, foster care placement, juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy and caring for ailing relatives are just some of the examples of students in the researcher’s classroom. These experiences have been observed to serve as motivations for students to improve their lives and the lives of others through the social work profession. These students routinely perform well in both the classroom and the field, often as a direct result of their past life experiences.

The presenter completed a qualitative study of both current and former non-traditional social work students. The impact of life experience on career choice was explored. In addition, the impact of life experience and status as a non-traditional student was considered when discussing the undergraduate social work education process. The following questions and more were explored: How do significant life experiences motivate students to pursue social work? How do those experiences help or hinder the educational process? What specific challenges do non-traditional students face? How do they overcome those challenges and succeed in their educational pursuits?

The findings of the study were presented 2017 Bachelor Program Directors annual conference in New Orleans, LA (See Appendix A) and ways in which social work educators can best serve non-traditional students were explored. Time was allowed for questions and idea exchange among session attendees.

## Presentation Power Point Slides



The researcher began her bachelor’s degree at age 32 after 10 years in advertising sales. At the time her children were 15 and 5. In her current role as a faculty member at a satellite campus, the majority of her students are non-traditional. The field of social work tends to attract non-traditional students as life experiences cultivate an interest in the field.

## Research Project Details

- Qualitative research project (1/3 of banded dissertation)
- Phenomenological approach – study of several people who have a shared experience
- Participants were 10 successful graduates (all BSW, some MSW)
- All participants met non-traditional criteria
- Interviews were semi-structured, audio taped and transcribed
- Data analysis revealed common themes among participants

This qualitative research study was done using a phenomenological approach – examining the phenomenon of the choice of social work by non-traditional university students and their experiences in completing their degree. All subjects were successful social work graduates – all participants have a BSW degree and five have both a BSW and MSW degree. Participants were chosen based on pre-determined criteria. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 1 ½ hours. Data analysis was done via transcripts of the interviews and themes were identified.

## Non-Traditional Student Criteria

- Non-traditional students are defined meeting two or more of the following\*:
  - Being independent for financial aid purposes
  - Having one or more dependents
  - Being a single caregiver
  - Not having a traditional high school diploma
  - Delaying post-secondary enrollment
  - Attending school part time
  - Being employed full time

\*National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

The criteria for determining subject participation was retrieved from the National Center for Education statistics. Non-traditional students are often labeled based on age; however, many other factors were considered in this project. Several of the participants had caregiving responsibilities and were employed full time in addition to other criteria.



## Participant Overview

- Seven females, three males
- All graduated with BSW, MSW or both within last five years
- Ages range from 27-56
- All participants but one currently employed in the field
- Seven married, three single
- All participants are parents, one is grandparent, three are single parents

Although all participants met the criteria for non-traditional students; the group itself was diverse. There was diversity in gender, age, socioeconomic status and experiences that led them to choose social work as a profession. All participants had graduated with their BSW within the past five years. Five of the participants had also completed their MSW degree in the same five period time frame.

## Reasons for the “Gap” in Education

- Pregnancy right after high school
- Went straight to work to support young family
- Started college – quit after a semester or two for various reasons
- Alcohol/drug usage
- Lack of funding (One participant accepted to prestigious music school but couldn't afford it – didn't qualify for financial aid – no assistance from parents)
- Attempt at higher education failed
  - “\_\_\_\_\_University and I mutually agreed that I didn't belong there”

All participants identified reasons for what the researcher termed as a “gap” in their educational pursuits. Some had never attended college and some attempted college unsuccessfully as a traditional student. The reasons for the gap were varied. Two participants identified substance abuse, three participants had children at the traditional college age, three students struggled academically in their first attempt at higher education. No one reason for the gap in education was experienced by a majority of participants.

## Why the Decision to Return?

- “I finally grew up”
- “I finally sobered up”
- More financially stable
- Desire for a better job
- “I wanted to do better for myself and my kids”
- Divorce/separation or other life transition
- Other majors didn’t work out (unsatisfied, unable to find job, unable to succeed)

Just as the reasons for the “gap” in higher education were varied, so were the reasons for return to school. In many cases, students were facing a period significant life transition that motivated them to pursue a degree. An underlying consistent theme for the return to higher education was to improve their quality of life and to help others that had experienced similar issues to themselves.

## Why Social Work?

### Life Experiences

- Sexual molestation victim
- Bullying victim
- Contemplated suicide
- Drug/Alcohol Addict
- Teenage Mother
- Spouse Incarcerated
- Rebellious Teen
- Estrangement from Parents

### Other Influences

- Positive experience with the field
- Negative experience with the field
- Wanted to help people
- Medical field not for me
- View of self as a protector
- Desire to help people “like me”
- View of the work as a form of mission
- Encouragement from others

A common theme among all participants was that they were able to attribute their choice of social work to past life experiences. Past trauma, drug use and experience with social services were among the reasons cited for the pursuit of social work as a profession.

## How did you make it happen financially?

- Vocational rehab – addiction diagnosis led to qualification
- Displaced worker funding – factory closure
- Inheritance
- Public Child Welfare Certification Program
- Loans, loans and more loans

Financial resources for higher education are common concern among non-traditional students. The participants in this study accessed various resources to make completing their degree financially feasible, some without the need for student loans. Vocational rehabilitation and displaced worker funding were among the financing options unique to these non-traditional students.

## Challenges of Being a Non-Traditional Student

- Time Management
- Time away from family – helping younger kids understand
- Finding balance
- Technology – (Online research, online courses, learning platforms)
- Math, Writing (APA Style)
- Retaining information
- Lack of support from some family/friends
- Changing outlook – contradictory to life experience

Balancing school work with other responsibilities (children, work, caregiving, etc.) was a challenge noted by all 10 participants. Other common challenges resulted from the gap in their education – technological advances (3), completing math after being out of school for years (5) and developing writing abilities (5) were all mentioned.

## Meeting the Challenges

- Explaining to family/soliciting and receiving support (Family meeting)
- Scheduling time and place for homework/studying
- “Accepting that I can’t do everything”
- Accepting help from family/friends (babysitting, mom hired a housekeeper)
- Remaining focused on the goal
- Support from faculty/staff at university

Participants had all found ways to overcome the challenges they faced while completing their degrees. Organization, time management, accepting help from family and friends and accepting that they “can’t do everything” were among the methods participants used in order to be successful.

## Advantages of being a Non-Traditional Student

- Life Experience
- Wisdom
- Experience being on the receiving end of social services
- More serious as a student
- Work ethic
- Goal driven
- Appreciate the process – lean in to it

Despite the challenges, all of the participants were able to describe advantages to being a non-traditional social work student. The most commonly recognized advantage was that of life experience – all of the students felt that, particularly in social work, life experience helped prepare them not only for the college expectations, but for the field itself. Several of the participants verbalized the belief that, as a non-traditional student, they were more serious about the coursework and had a stronger work ethic than their traditional counterparts.

## What Faculty/Staff can do to Help

- Give good feedback – students like to know where they stand
- Be understanding when life situations occur
- Be aware of time constraints on non-traditional students
- Encourage them when they are overwhelmed
- Provide assistance with technology and other challenges
- Provide assistance with financial challenges

The participants were asked what faculty/staff at the university could have done or did do to help them achieve their degree. Participants appreciated when faculty acknowledged their status as non-traditional students and displayed an understanding of the challenges that resulted from that status. They also expressed that they had faculty that were encouraging to them, especially when they were overwhelmed.

## What I have done....

- Develop mentoring relationships with students
- Have “group sessions” when class overall seems overwhelmed
- Encourage students to support each other – Facebook pages, etc.
- Secured fund to help with financial crises
- Spent time assisting with challenges (technology/writing)
- Express empathy about complex lives of non-traditional students
- Hold non-traditional students to same standard as other students

The presenter, as an instructor of non-traditional students, has found that there are things she can do to aid in their success. Development of mentoring relationships is a key task a faculty member can do to help non-traditional students. Having that kind of trust relationship allows the student to depend on the faculty member for information, support and encouragement. Being understanding and empathetic to the challenges faced is also important for faculty. Participants stressed a desire to be held to the same standard as other students despite their challenges – something that the presenter has routinely done.



## Would you do it again? Why or why not?

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- “Absolutely - I am finally helping people”
- “Of course – my degree is something no one can take away.”
- “Yes – It was a healing process for me”
- “Absolutely – It has given me my self-esteem back”
- “Lordy yes! I found it very empowering”.
- “I feel I am where God wanted me to be all along”

The final question posed to the participants was simply “Would you do it again?”. All participants responded affirmatively and expanded on those answers with the reasons for their answers. Empowerment was a key theme among the answer of the question. These students will now be able to move forward and empower others through the social work profession.

## Contact Information

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Fragoso and his colleagues conducted a study focused on the higher education non-traditional student in Portugal. As a result of the Bologna Process, the numbers of non-traditional students had grown exponentially in the years prior to the study. The researchers sought to determine both the barriers non-traditional students encountered and the positive impact a college education had on them.

This work contributed to the research project by allowing the researcher to view a similar effort. Examination of the Fragoso, et al. work inspired the researcher's direction when planning interviews for this project. This work also added to validity to the researcher's efforts by highlighting the reality of the challenges faced by non-traditional students.

Francois, E. J. (2014). Motivational orientations of non-traditional adult students to enroll in a degree-seeking program. *New Horizons in Adult Education & Human Resource Development*, 26(2), 19-35. doi:10.1002/nha3.20060

The focus of this study by Francois was the motivation of non-traditional students to attend college. Francois wanted to determine why, with the time constraints and other life demands they experience, non-traditional students are compelled to make the sacrifices necessary to complete a degree. Rising numbers of non-traditional students were described as a motivating factor for pursuing the study.

Motivation was one of the key concepts explored in the study presented for this dissertation. Life experience as motivation was a focus of the research. All participants were able to identify one or more life experiences that served as motivation either to attend college, pursue the field of social work, or both.

Gibbons, M. M. 1., & Woodside, M. (2014). Addressing the needs of first-generation college students: Lessons learned from adults from low-education families. *Journal of College Counseling*, 17(1), 21-36. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1882.2014.00045.x

Gibbons and Woodside discussed motivation for non-traditional students to attend college and their expectations as they entered the workforce in their chosen career. Family of origin was revealed as an influential factor among the participants to attend college. Participants identified members of their family of origin as motivating due to witnessing struggles that took place due to lack of higher education or simply as encouragers in their own pursuits. The research for this presentation also explored motivation among the participants as well as sources of support. Participants experienced both positive and negative influences from their respective families of origin. Some family members encouraged the participants in their journey through higher education, while others did not see the value in the pursuit.

Gilardi, S., & Guglielmetti, C. (2011). University life of non-traditional students: Engagement styles and impact on attrition. *Journal of Higher Education*, 82(1), 33-53. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.stthomas.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/ezproxy.stthomas.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eft&AN=508205622&site=ehost-live>

The study described by Gilardi and Guglielmetti focused on the retention of non-traditional students in the university setting, particularly between the freshman and sophomore year. Levels of engagement of students with faculty and university services were explored as

influencing factors related to retention of non-traditional students. Results of the study demonstrated that students with higher levels of engagements in the university setting experienced higher levels of retention.

This presentation also explored factors that led to retention among participants.

Identification of sources of support and keys to success were addressed with the participants.

As discovered by Gilardi and Guglielmetti, the level of engagement with faculty and other support systems increases the likelihood of retention of the non-traditional student.

Markle, G. (2015). Factors influencing persistence among nontraditional university students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 65(3), 267-285. doi:10.1177/0741713615583085

Persistence among non-traditional students was examined by Markle. Graduation rates were the focus of the work and participants were followed over a three year period in which they were students in higher education. Issues that conflicted with educational pursuits as well as methods to overcome those conflicts were explored.

Similar issues were explored in this presentation. Participants in the study were asked what challenges they experienced in pursuit of their degree. Then, participants were asked to identify means used to overcome those challenges. All participants had demonstrated persistence as all had graduated with either a BSW degree or both BSW and MSW degrees.

Miller, M. T., & Lu, M. (2003). Serving non-traditional students in E-learning environments: Building successful communities in the virtual campus. *Educational Media International*, 40(1), 163-169. doi:10.1080/0952398032000092206

Online learning environments bring on additional challenges to the non-traditional student.

Faculty must be aware of the presence of non-traditional students in the online classroom.

The growth of online offerings allows for greater access to higher education by non-

traditional students; however the technology used may bring a challenge to this part of the student population. Miller and Mei-Yan found that, like the traditional classroom, the online learning environment requires faculty to acknowledge the unique challenges and needs of the non-traditional student.

This presentation did reveal that some of the study participants found technology one of the challenges of pursuing higher education as a non-traditional student. Participants suggested that faculty should be aware of the challenges faced by non-traditional students regarding technology, along with the other challenges faced by this segment of students.

Owen, M. (2002). 'Sometimes you feel you're in niche time'. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 3(1), 7-23. doi:10.1177/1469787402003001002

Owen posits that non-traditional students often need specialized support in order to be successful in pursuit of a degree. This article explores several models of personal tutoring as sources of support. Owen suggests that personal tutors designed for support of non-traditional students provide more than academic guidance. They should also be a source of access to university services and a source that provides emotional support, as well. Owen sees this type of resource as a tool to promote greater retention among non-traditional students.

The participants from the study in this presentation all utilized support from various sources to be successful in higher education. However, there was no organized support from the educational institution. The participants in this study would have certainly benefitted from the kinds of support efforts described by Owen.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences. (2015). *Demographic and enrollment characteristics of non-traditional undergraduates: 2011-2012* (NCES Publication No. 2015-025). Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015025.pdf>

Information from this source was used by the presenter to determine criteria for participants in the study. The National Center for Education Statistics has specific criteria for non-traditional students. This measure of criteria was used to provide for study validity.

### Attendee Feedback Summary

Attendees of the presentation including faculty members of social work programs at various universities as well as BSW students attending the conference to present their own research. 15 attendees completed evaluation forms that were created by the presenter of the study. Overall responses both on the written evaluation and in informal conversations with the presenter following the presentation were positive.

Attendees were asked five questions regarding the presentation. Questions posed related to the relevancy of the presentation to the attendee's work, the knowledge of the presenter about the subject, the presenter's ability to engage the group during the presentation, the clarity of the information presented and the overall benefit to the attendee. Answers were submitted using a Likert scale with possible answers ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5). Of the 15 responses, 14 responded with either a "4" (Agree) or "5" (Strongly Agree) on all areas.

The attendees were given the opportunity to make comments at the end of the evaluation. Those comments were overall positive. Some comments related to the presenter and stated that she was "knowledgeable on the topic", that the topic was "presented well" and that she had a "welcoming energy". Comments referring to the research itself included that the topic "spoke to the people at the session" and was "very empowering" and that it is "important to recognize these students". (See Appendix B).

### Reflection on Learning

The author met the criteria of a non-traditional student as outlined in this dissertation when she began her pursuit of higher education at age 30. Following several years as a practicing social worker, the author accepted an opportunity to teach in higher education. Currently in her fifth year of full time teaching, the majority of the author's students have met the criteria for non-traditional students. This past history led to this choice of topic focus for the author's dissertation for purposes of obtaining a Doctorate in Social Work. This doctorate focused on teaching in social work education and students were encouraged to choose a topic related to teaching in higher education.

The author chose the topic of non-traditional social work students for two major reasons. First, to learn about non-traditional students, their experiences that led them to the field, the challenges they faced and how they overcame those challenges to be successful in obtaining their degree. Second, the author, as a faculty member in higher education, wanted to learn what unique needs non-traditional students have that could be addressed by higher education in order to increase the students' likelihood of success.

The learning that resulted from this process was multi-layered and correlated closely to information found in existed literature. However, there is limited existing literature that focuses specifically on social work students. This study highlighted the great impact of past difficult life experiences and how those experiences influenced the choice of social work as an area of study. The participants had overcome challenges such as sexual molestation, bullying, drug and alcohol addiction, domestic violence, teenage pregnancy and more. The field of social work was chosen as a means of helping with similar and other challenges. All of the students reported being

greatly challenged in their pursuit of a degree while also describing the sources of inner strength and support they drew from in order to be successful.

In addition to learning about the non-traditional social work student, the author also learned about herself through this process. She learned, despite beginning her adult life as an insecure 18 year old new mother in a new marriage and little material possessions that she, like her participants, could do things she once never imagined. Never as that 18 year old woman, did the author see herself completing high level research through a prestigious university and then presenting that research at a national professional conference in order to meet the requirements of a doctoral degree. The participants in this study echoed much of what the author now knows is true – that with determination, hard work and good sources of support, anything is possible, despite challenges that exist.

Social work is a field of second chances, unconditional positive regard and perpetual hope. The participants in this study exemplify that in their own lives as well as in their professional endeavors. The combination of education and life experience allows them to influence the lives of their clients. As one participant stated, “The greatest work I will ever do in my field is by setting an example”. As social workers, they now give hope to others that are faced with great challenges. This is the essence of social work and the author is honored to be a part of the profession and of the educational system that trains its participants.



## Appendix A

### Documentation of Acceptance and Presentation

#### Documentation of Acceptance

#### BPD Annual Conference Submission Decision LetterA

B

BPD Conference Planning Committee <noreply@precismail.com>

#### Reply all

Tue 9/20/2016, 5:11 PM

Adcock, Anne

Inbox

Flag for follow up. Start by Tuesday, September 20, 2016. Due by Tuesday, September 20, 2016.

#### Action Items

Dear Anne Adcock :

We are delighted to inform you that your proposal, reference # 0844-000041, has been accepted by our reviewers and recommended for presentation at the 2017 BPD Annual Conference in New Orleans, LA. Please review the information below and adhere to all noted deadlines for having your presentation included in the conference program. All information to be included in the program is listed below and will be printed as submitted if no changes are received by the deadline.

Accepted presenters should plan to attend the entire conference and be prepared to present on any of the conference dates (March 1-5, 2017). We will be scheduling sessions over the next few weeks and all presentations will be scheduled and/or paired according to topic area. If you are presenting in more than one session, you may be scheduled for both presentations on the same day but not in the same time slot. Due to the number of activities that must be scheduled we are unable to take special requests for presentation dates and times.

Please review the information and deadlines below as they relate to your presentation and travel planning. If your plans have changed and you are unable to present at the conference, please contact us immediately. Again, we thank you for your submission and look forward to a wonderful conference.

#### Presentation Information (to be listed in the program):

**Title:** "I've been there": Life experience and the Non-traditional Social Work Student

**Track:** Diverse Populations

**Format:** Roundtable

**Abstract:** Non-traditional students are drawn to Social Work as a profession due to past life experiences. Through a qualitative study of current and former non-traditional students, the impact of life experience on both career choice and educational pursuits was explored. Findings revealed how students met the challenges of higher education.

**Primary Presenter:** Anne Adcock

**University/Affiliation:** Campbellsville University

**State/Location:** Kentucky

Additional Presenters: (co-presenters will receive a separate letter with their contact information listed)

### **Scheduling:**

Accepted presenters should be prepared to present at any time during the March 1-5 **conference**. Pre-**conference** sessions will be scheduled on Wednesday, March 1st and all other sessions will be scheduled between 8:00 am-4:30 pm on March 2nd - 4th and 8:00 am-12:00 pm on March 5th. Due to the number of activities that need to be scheduled we are unable to accommodate special requests for presentation dates/times.

**Length of Presentations:** Paper presentations consist of two sessions paired together in one 75-minute slot. Paper presenters each have equal presentation time and should allot time for questions at the end of their presentation. Workshop, round table, general session and invited speaker presentations are scheduled for 75 minutes each.

**Membership:** All non-BSW students must be paid 2017 members of **BPD** by January 1, 2017 in order to present at the **conference**. **BPD** does not offer membership waivers for community practitioners or non-invited speakers at this time. Membership fees for professionals are \$185 and \$60 for retirees. At this time, **BPD** does not have a student membership category and all non-BSW students presenting at the **conference** will need to pay the \$185 membership rate to present. Membership is not required for BSW students, but students presenting with faculty will pay the \$155 student **conference** rate, or the student volunteer rate to attend.

**Registration:** All presenters must register for the **conference**. Registration will open by October 21st. Please visit our [www.bpdonline.org]website for additional information.

**Technology:** All general session, workshop and paper presentation rooms are furnished with an LCD and Screen. All other presentation types are restricted from use of audio visual equipment. Additional presentation equipment can be ordered at an additional charge to the speaker directly from the hotel. Audio Visual, electrical, and internet order forms are available through **BPD**.

### **Important Dates and Deadlines:**

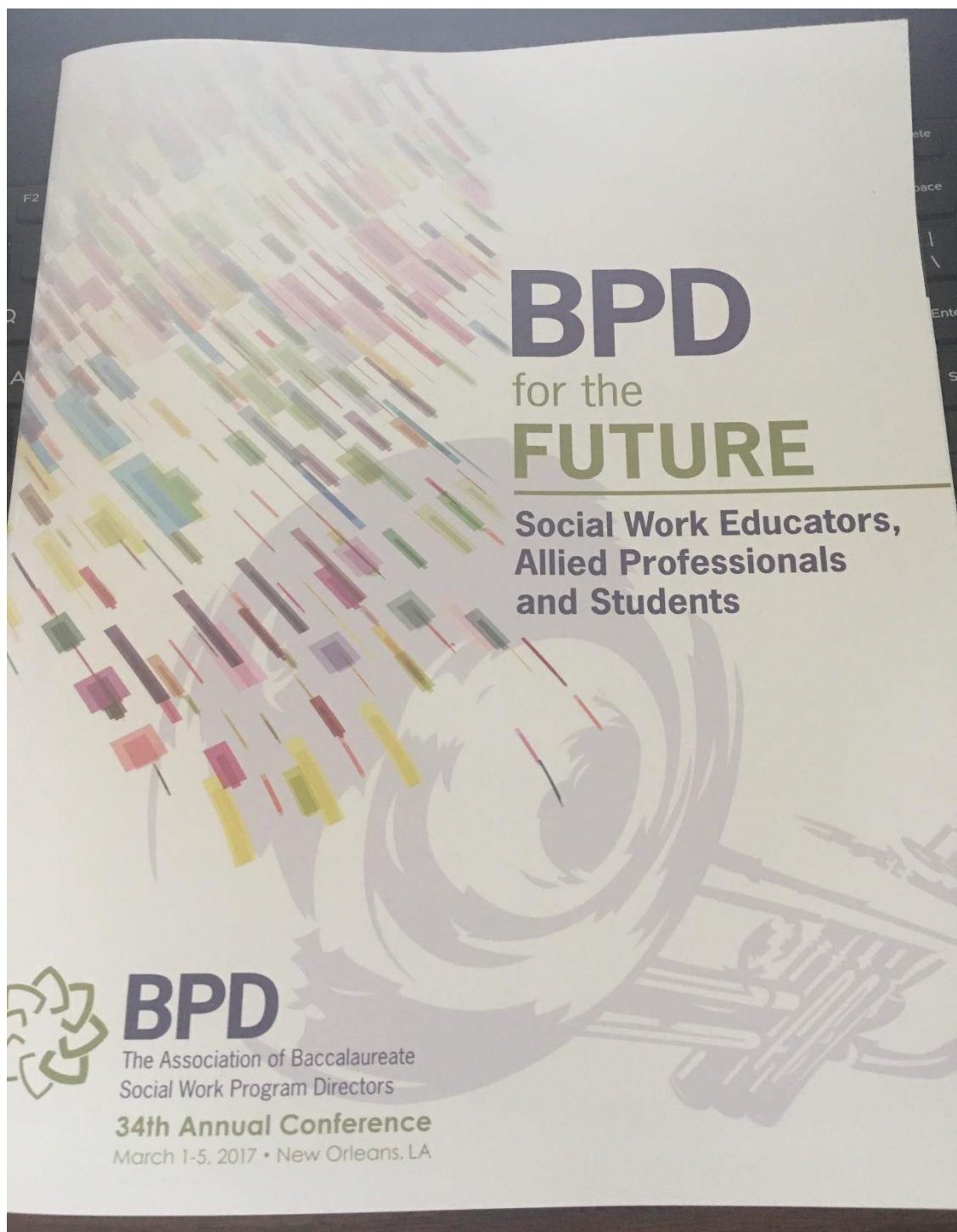
*Changes to Presentation Info:	October 21, 2016
Session Cancellation Deadline:	October 21, 2016
Session Schedule Distributed:	December 1, 2016
Membership Deadline:	January 1, 2017

*\*Please note that changes to presentation info are limited to the removal of a speaker, and content of title, and abstract. Adding of speakers once a proposal has been accepted is prohibited.*

Amanda Scott  
**BPD** Executive Director

Shannon Cambron  
**Conference** Chair

## Documentation of Presentation



## FRIDAY SESSIONS CONTINUED

### • INTERMEDIATE LEVEL WORKSHOP *Faculty Development*

Bayside B  
3:15 PM – 4:30 PM

**An Experiential Approach to Teaching Macro-Practice to Undergraduate Students**

*Presenters:*  
Erica H. Serrine  
Southeastern University (FL)  
Julie Furj-Kuhn  
Memorial University (OH)

### • INTERMEDIATE LEVEL WORKSHOP *Field Education & Instruction*

Bayside C  
3:15 PM – 4:30 PM

**The Nevada Policy Practice Academy Model: Developing Sustainable Policy Practice Field Placements**

*Presenters:*  
Mary E. Hylton  
University of Nevada, Reno  
Jill M. Manitt  
University of Nevada, Reno

### • INTERMEDIATE LEVEL WORKSHOP *International Social Work*

Borgne  
3:15 PM – 4:30 PM

**Designing Curriculum to Prepare Students for International Field Placements**

*Presenters:*  
Andy Dunlap  
Elizabethtown College (PA)  
Susan Mapp  
Elizabethtown College (PA)

### • NADD INVITED WORKSHOP *Faculty Development*

Edgewood  
3:15 PM – 4:30 PM

**Becoming a Dean or Director: Opportunities and Challenges for your Aspirations**

*Presenters:*  
Andrew Safyer  
Adelphi University (NY)  
Debra McPhee  
Fordham University (NY)  
Karen Bullock  
North Carolina State University

### • INTERMEDIATE LEVEL WORKSHOP *Aging & Gerontology*

Estherwood  
3:15 PM – 4:30 PM

**Designing, Implementing, and Evaluating Intergenerational Service Learning in a Gerontology Elective**

*Presenters:*  
Christa N. Hogan  
Monmouth University (NJ)  
Sanjana Ragudaran  
Monmouth University (NJ)

### • INTERMEDIATE LEVEL WORKSHOP *Faculty Development*

Gallier  
3:15 PM – 4:30 PM

**Cooperative Learning Strategies and Mutual Aid Groups in BSW Education**

*Presenters:*  
Karen Myers  
James Madison University (VA)  
Laura Hunt Trull  
James Madison University (VA)

### • ROUNDTABLE PRESENTATIONS *Multi-Track*

Maurepas  
3:15 PM – 4:30 PM

**"I've Been There": Life Experience and the Non-traditional Social Work Student**

*Presenter:*  
Anne C. Adcock  
Campbellsville University (KY)

**Political Self-Disclosure in the Social Work Classroom: Pedagogical Considerations in Decision-Making**

*Presenter:*  
Terri Klemm  
Centenary University (NJ)

**Field Education Preparation for Professional Practice – Path to Licensure Model**

*Presenter:*  
Janice J. Fitts  
Association of Social Work Boards (VA)

**Welcome to the Shark Tank: Active Learning Advocacy Teaching Methods**

*Presenters:*  
Vanessa Drew-Branch  
University of North Carolina Charlotte

### • INTERMEDIATE LEVEL PAIRED PAPERS

#### *Research*

Napoleon D1  
3:15 PM – 4:30 PM

**Navigating methodological processes, tensions and ethical dilemmas with LGBTQ Foster Care Youth**

*Presenters:*  
Moshoula Capous-Desyllas  
California State University Northridge  
Sarah Mountz  
California State University Northridge

**Incorporating Research into the Curriculum that Engages and Prepares Students for Practice**

*Presenters:*  
Dione Moultrie King  
University of West Florida  
Staci Jagoe  
University of West Florida

## Appendix B

### ***I've Been There: Life Experience and the Non-traditional Social Work Student***

Please circle the number that best describes your thoughts on this presentation:

1: Strongly Disagree    2: Disagree    3: Neutral    4: Agree    5: Strongly Agree

- |   |                   |
|---|-------------------|
| 1. The information presented was relevant to my work.                 | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 2. The presenter was knowledgeable about the subject matter.          | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 3. The presenter was able to engage the group in discussion.          | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 4. The research was presented in a clear manner.                      | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 5. I feel participating in this discussion was beneficial to my work. | 1   2   3   4   5 |

Please feel free to offer any comments or suggestions below:

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*Thank you for your participation!*

